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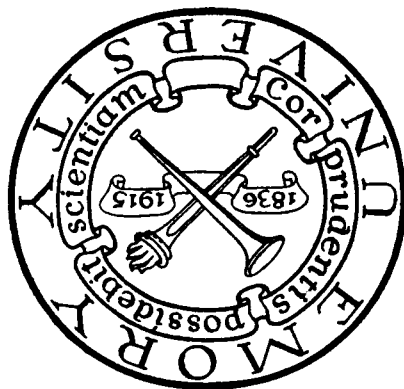
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WILD GEORGIE

BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS

AUTHOR OF

'LIL' 'BAITING THE TRAP'

ETC.

NEW EDITION

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WILD GEORGIE.



CHAPTER I.

PRETTY AND PERT.

MY dear Georgie, I am quite ashamed of you ; what on earth must Mr. Clive think of you ?
‘Why, that I am a very nice young woman, to be sure.’

‘Hush, hush, child—pray don’t talk so, it is too dreadful, indeed it is ! Believe me, I have seen far more of the world than you have, and I can assure you that the fast manners assumed by the young ladies of the present day don’t call forth from gentlemen the admiration which they seem to expect. If you had only heard half the remarks I have been condemned to listen to about your own behaviour to-night, I am sure you would instantly form a resolution to be more decorous for the future.’

‘I am sure I should do no such thing. Bother the people ! what do I care for their tittle-tattle ? My dear aunt, you should be above listening to such nonsense. But then you were born half a century ago, before girls knew how to take care of themselves.’

And Miss Georgie Trant pulled the folds of her cashmere cloak more closely round her, and, getting farther into the corner of her aunt’s comfortable brougham, closed her eyes, as if she thought this last argument quite conclusive. But Lady Bowyer had been brought up in the good old school where fair English girls were famed for their maidenly reserve and graceful retiring manners, before the dew on the sweet flowers had been dashed away by that rude jostle in

the great world which constitutes the society of the present day; and she shuddered with horror as she watched the proceedings of various young ladies in the modern ball-rooms, and especially those of her young niece, who was by no means a bad specimen of the class so well known as 'fast girls.'

'Take care of yourself, Georgie!—that is precisely what you have to learn. Your behaviour is altogether most injudicious and in every way injurious, and let me tell you, if you persist in it, your mother may take charge of you, for I acknowledge myself quite unequal to the task.'

'Mama! why, she would take me to æsthetic teas, platonic luncheons, and eclectic dinners. I should die of exhaustion in a week, from the over-taxation of my risible organs. Thank you, I have quite enough peeps into that olio of oddities called clever people, as it is. But tell me, auntie, why should I not amuse myself while life is young? Pray, now, what was the harm in dancing' with Mr. Clive? I don't suppose he objected to it.'

'Surely, child, you must feel the harm; you are not a baby, Georgie, nor are you wanting in shrewdness. I saw Sir Henry Wilbraham look at you several times, as though he would have asked you to dance, but you were so much occupied with that *vaurien*, Clive, you never even bowed to him.'

'No, I am not wanting in shrewdness, auntie mine, and I see perfectly. Poor Clive sues *in formâ pauperis*, to quote some of our household *savans*, while Sir Henry can boast of broad acres. But here we are, so good night, auntie dear. Don't fash yourself any more about last century's prejudices, but be content with wild Georgie as she is.'

And the young lady sprang from the carriage, and in another moment was in the well-lighted hall. It was long past midnight, but late hours had as yet had no effect on Georgie's fresh young beauty; her hazel eyes were instinct with life and hope—in fact her whole countenance seemed to overflow with happiness, and there was a certain amount of piquancy, in the saucy, self-reliant smile perpetually playing round her mouth, which was very pleasing and taking.

'Has mama gone to bed, Josette?' she asked the maid who took her cloak.

'No, mademoiselle. My lady is in the drawing-room.'

‘Are those fools still there?’

The maid laughed and nodded her head in acquiescence ; and Miss Georgie passed upstairs, and dashing open the drawing-room door with a jerk, greeted some half-a-dozen people seated at a round table with one of her ringing, merry laughs. It was a poetical night, that is to say, the assembled party was listening to the manuscript poem of a very young aspirant for the bay wreath. Lady Ida Trant was the reader, and in a clear, shrill voice, and with considerable emphasis, she enunciated the long, heavy, would-be classical lines.

Lady Ida was—well, if it be true that genius is akin to madness, she was a genius, for excessive eccentricity was apparent both in her appearance and manner ; yet there was no doubt that she was clever. She had a smattering of most things—philosophy, art, literature, music, each had its turn ; and her house was the centre of attraction for a certain number of the small fry who swarm at the skirts of knowledge, and who, with Lady Ida at their head, imagined that they contributed largely to the general improvement of the world.

For her mother’s intellectual vagaries Georgie had not the smallest respect, so, without considering either time or place, she burst out with,—

‘Mama, Aunt Sophy is very angry because I danced ten times with Oswald Clive.’

‘Lucky fellow !’ murmured the poet, trying to squeeze an impassioned look out of his meaningless grey eyes.

‘A very decided measure, I should say, miss,’ remarked a strong-minded American female, as she surveyed Georgie’s gauzy attire with no very kindly expression. ‘Well, and what came of it?’

‘More than comes of all your feeble little coquettings with science ; for science won’t have you ; and Mr. Clive is very far gone about me !’ And with this pert retort, Georgie seated herself on the sofa, and put on a look of wondering inquiry.

No one spoke, for as Georgie, with her smart remarks, always turned the *savans*, as she called them, into ridicule, her presence generally had the effect of checking for awhile their little outbursts of literary enthusiasm.

‘So,’ said the young lady, with the cool effrontery which

was her wont, 'there is still one branch of art unrepresented in this charming coterie. May I offer my own pencil? I assure you I am a first-rate caricaturist.'

Lady Ida had laid down the manuscript when Georgie entered the room, and though she had not yet spoken, she was looking at her daughter in a wrapt sort of way. Georgie was Lady Ida's weakness; she delighted in that '*espèglerie* of manner' which the world called 'rudeness;' and she constantly averred that, if Georgie would only 'trammel herself with the conventionalities of knowledge, she would be one of the shining lights of the age.' Poor little Georgie! she had at least the wisdom to know that this exalted opinion of her powers was but another phase of her mother's madness; and owing, perhaps, to the high development of her bump of disrespect, she treated it with her usual derision.

'Now, dear mother, don't you think it is time to descend from Parnassus, and retire quietly to bed? You will be but the ghost of yourself to-morrow, if you sit up much later.'

The poet made a gesture of regret.

'*Povero!* I am very sorry, but it is nearly two. Your poem probably will not bear daylight; well, let me see, I will read it for you myself to-morrow evening, if you like.'

The youthful versifier, who worshipped at Georgie's shrine, and who had but rarely even a bone thrown him by his goddess, blushed and faltered endless thanks.

'Let me look at it, though,' she said, as she took it from her mother's hand. 'Oh, most classical hexameters. I take back my promise. Why, they would break my jaw. Now if you had warbled forth an idyll, or chirruped an ode to your mistress's beauty, I would have done my best for you; but I cannot stand *Lemprère* in rhyme.'

Georgie had picked up a good deal of literary cant, and she often made it stand her in the stead of deeper learning.

The disconcerted poet pocketed his condemned verses with a sigh, and with the rest of the company prepared to accept Miss Georgie's somewhat summary dismissal.

'Packed them all off, mama,' she said, as the last coat-tail disappeared round the drawing-room door. 'Why did you not send them away before? You should have been in bed long ago; you know Dr. White said you were to keep early hours.'

‘You are a naughty child, my darling. I am afraid you have offended some of my valued friends and coadjutors.’

‘Pah ! they will all come again to-morrow, never fear ; you are far too great a star for them to exist out of your radiance. But if it amuses you to have those delectable beings dangling after you, it is quite the same to me—only I would rather dance with Clive.’

‘Aunt Sophy will be here to-morrow with such a story,’ said Lady Ida, as her daughter pushed her upstairs to bed, ‘and in the morning I have promised to talk to Jones for a couple of hours about his new invention ; and in the afternoon De Fort is coming to practise some music for Lady Clarence’s concert. I shall never have time to listen to your aunt.’

‘So much the better. It is all nonsense ; Aunt Sophy and her old-fashioned notions must be pooh-poohed. Anyhow, come what may, I intend to do as I like, so now good night.’ And off Georgie tripped to her room, murmuring to herself, ‘What fools old women are, to be sure, for thinking they know so much better than we young ones ! Why, neither mama nor aunt Sophy can take care of themselves the least bit in the world !’

And you, bright Georgie, let us see how much more successful you are in feathering your own little nestie with soft down. And Georgie fell asleep, thinking over the past dances, and counting on her fingers how many hours must elapse before the next amusement and excitement would begin ; for the morrow’s fête would bring again the hero of her young romance, the handsome, dashing Oswald Clive. Georgie had known him but a few days, and was scarcely in love as yet ; she was too merry and saucy to be easily caught, yet her wings were somewhat singed, and as she sauntered down the lawn with her chaperon at Mrs. Vernon’s garden party on the following day, the sight of Mr. Clive was no unpleasing one.

‘Philosophy !—what on earth do you know about philosophy ? I should not have imagined it was a study much in your line,’ she exclaimed, as she joined the group of people to whom he was talking, and heard the last word.

He turned, with a start.

‘My philosophy consists in trying to endure patiently the vain hunt I have had, searching for you in this dense crowd,’ he said, as he shook her hand warmly.

‘Very neatly put, considering you were not talking, or even thinking of me at all. Well, I suppose this slap-dash age has a good deal of philosophy about it, though it is rather startling to hear the word coolly coming from your lips in the middle of a crowded fête.’

‘I suppose you mean that people are so worn-out and indolent that they take things as they come, and call it philosophy.’

‘Just so; but I thought you were of a more energetic and impulsive temperament. I am disappointed, that is all.’

Georgie dropped her eyes, or she would have met a look which would have fully convinced her of the absence of coldness in Oswald Clive’s nature.

‘Miss Trant might fear me did she know how thoroughly I am the victim of impulse. Better—yes, better she should think me cold and philosophical—for my own welfare, I wish to Heaven I were!’

There was a deep passion in these almost whispered tones which, for a moment, silenced Georgie. She looked up at him, and met his earnest gaze.

‘How odd you are to-day!’ she said, her readiness of tongue forsaking her. ‘Has anything happened since last night?’

‘The world does not always treat one the same, Miss Trant, and my philosophy will not weigh in the balance against its fickleness.’

‘The world!—I hate the world!’ cried Georgie, ‘if by the world you mean society. I despise its conventionalities, its etiquette, its humbug! I wish to goodness I could get away from its odious trammels for ever!’

Oh! that the desert were my dwelling-place,
With one sweet spirit for my minister,
That I might all forget the human race,
And, hating no one, love but only her!

suggested Clive, quoting a great poet, as he smiled on his companion.

‘Yes, that is the kind of thing,’ cried Georgie, laughing, —‘a sort of Robinson Crusoe existence.’

‘And could you really bear such a life—away from all the surroundings you have had from childhood—the friends, luxuries, comforts of your home?’

‘Oh! it would be delightful!—something new, you know.’

‘But when its newness wore off, fair lady, and you could not get back to your old place, what would happen then?’

‘Then I could grow philosophical, and bear it, I suppose,’ said Georgie, with a pout.

‘Who is cold now? Believe me, philosophy will not help you much, unless the stronger and warmer sentiment born of kindred sympathy be found in your desert.’

‘Ah! then you are not a philosopher, and never will be, however hard you may try. It lurks, not in those large black eyes. All the philosophers I have ever seen at mama’s tea-parties have been shrivelled, withered little men. I fancy, too, that dirtiness forms a leading feature in a philosopher’s creed, for, like the monks, I am sure they never change their habits.’

Mr. Clive smiled as he bent low over his companion.

‘Is not the faith of love an easier and more womanly creed to learn? Do you think you could be taught it by me, dear Georgie?’

‘*Ça dépend*,’ was the saucy answer. ‘The *savans* think me rather obtuse, for they always stop their wise conversation when I approach.’

‘All the more reason why you should not disturb them, but consent at once to enter my new school.’

‘Are you sure you would not be a hard task-master?’

Mr. Clive winced. ‘Life is a hard road,’ he said, ‘but love has a magic to take the edge off some of the stones.’

‘Then your creed is not Utopian. I don’t think I have the pluck to try it,’ said the pert tongue, though Georgie’s eyes were instinct with tenderness the while.

‘Have the attributes of the master himself no power to make his creed an attractive one?’

‘Upon my word, Mr. Clive, you are unbearable—you have grown so conceited.—Yes, Sir Henry, this is our valse.—Excuse me, Mr. Clive, we must talk philosophy some other time.’ And with a smile and a nod to the enraged Clive, she was in another moment lost in the mazes of the waltz with Sir Henry Wilbraham.

They stopped at last, gasping for breath, as people do in a crowded room on a hot afternoon.

‘What is that I hear about philosophy, Miss Trant? Surely Clive does not give way to that sort of thing?’

‘Indeed he does, and so do I. I assure you I am a great philosopher.’

‘May I ask to which sect you belong—to that of the Epicureans or the Stoics?’

‘To the Stoics, I should imagine, for my creed resolves itself into taking things as they come.’

‘That is a very poor sort of doctrine.’

‘Do you know a better?’

‘I am happy to say I do. Do your duty in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call you.’

Georgie looked at him with wondering eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ she said. ‘What duty can you have but to please yourself?’

‘Every one has a duty to perform, from the king on the throne to the commonest labourer who works for hire.’

This was altogether new doctrine for Georgie, and she remained silent for some minutes. At last she said,

‘And your duty, Sir Henry—may I ask what it is?’

‘To look after the tenantry and people on my estate in Hants, and see that they have food and clothing for their bodies, and schools wherein their souls may be trained for Heaven.’

‘How very odd!’ suggested Georgie. ‘You deserve great credit.’

‘I do not look for human praise, nor should I have mooted this subject to-day, but that you professed to accept a false philosophy. Forgive me, Miss Trant, if I have seemed rude.’

Sir Henry had taken a great fancy to Georgie’s bright genial ways, though he pitied her for what he called the falseness of her education; for while Lady Ida had been devoted to her literary clique, Georgie had been left to pick up such waifs and strays of knowledge as she could; and now that she was old enough to enter society, she was allowed to lounge about the world after her own fashion, and to fire her random shots at people and things in general, with no one to check their wildness or stop their dangerous course.

‘I wonder if I could do anything useful if I were to try?’ asked Georgie, half of herself and half of her companion.

There was an amused twinkle in Sir Henry’s eye.

‘Now you are laughing at me; you had better tell me I am an idiot at once.’

‘Excuse me, my dear Miss Trant, I was only smiling at

the naïve simplicity which can own to never having tried to be useful.'

'Well, I have everything I want—nothing to think of but how to amuse myself. What would you have me do?—make puddings or darn stockings?'

'My dear young lady, this is scarcely fair questioning. I have no right to lecture you ; besides, I do not wish to make you an enemy for life by my truisms.'

'Tell me instantly what you consider to be a woman's duty,' cried Georgie, somewhat angrily, as she stamped her little foot.

'That is a vague question. A woman's duty must depend on her position. My ideas, too, on the subject are so little in accordance with the realities of the present day, that I had perhaps better remain silent ; but it would indeed grieve me to see my wife, had I one, lend herself to the follies of the age, and spend her time gadding about perpetually in frivolous amusement, while the graver but perhaps less attractive duties of life remained unperformed.'

'With real love would come the desire to do what was right and good, I should imagine,' said Georgie, rather soberly. 'Half the women who gad about, as you call it, have married for position.'

'There is the mischief. My dear Miss Trant, no girl who was ever likely to do right or act honestly could marry a man she did not love, for mere position.'

'Bravo !' said Georgie, her bright eyes flashing, and her colour heightening, 'that is a crushing blow for most of your acquaintances, but I commend it. Look you, Sir Henry, if ever I bring down on my head the onus of the small-minded petty clique in the midst of which my life has had its beginning, by what is called an 'imprudent marriage,' will you stand my friend, remembering the lesson you have given me to-day?'

'I hope I may always claim the privilege of being your friend, Miss Trant.'

'Done ! Now let us shake hands on it.' And the mischievous little face beamed with delight ; 'look at my dear, old, last-century aunt, sitting the model of propriety in the corner ; wouldn't she look grimmer than fell Death himself, if she knew I had just struck up an eternal friendship with a man ! But come along, let us go and talk to the old lady a little, for verily I believe some day she will refuse, in sober earnest, to take me out any more.'



CHAPTER II.

STRUGGLING LITERATI.

FIVE o'clock tea at Mrs. Baird's ! A very different sort of entertainment from the fashionable afternoon sippings which go on daily in the drawing-rooms of the rich. Not that Mrs. Baird was exactly poor ; she was an independent, strong-minded American widow, with great pretensions to much learning—a bony, sinewy, repellent-looking woman, of what is called 'a certain age.' Her hard unpleasing voice, and a knock-you-down sort of manner, which may have been only the crust that enclosed a kindly heart, did not, however, serve to win for her much love or confidence. She thought, perhaps, that her manner impressed her associates with an idea of her cleverness ; and certainly the habit she had of pooh-poohing the frivolities and shortcomings of others somewhat awed and silenced those who did not set up for the high standard of moral and intellectual excellence to which Mrs. Baird aspired. Georgie Trant alone seemed unconvinced of Mrs. Baird's superiority, and allowed her glib tongue to utter its smart nothings, and fire its pert stinging little shots, utterly regardless of the presence of the great American blue-stocking. Following in the wake of most democrats, Mrs. Baird nursed, with an unacknowledged feeling of pride, that little bit of tuft whose possession put Lady Ida Trant on a higher elevation than herself, and on every possible occasion she marched out for general parade every scintilla of friendship which existed between them, with a pertinacity which not unfrequently evoked a smile. Thus, sharp as she was sometimes on poor little Georgie, that young lady was her mother's child, and was therefore treated with more leniency than 'frivolous girls' were wont to receive from the dreaded Mrs. Baird.

But to return to the five o'clock repast. It was no

ante-prandial idling, where the refreshing beverage of the East was drunk, out of delicate and beauteous Sèvres, in the midst of a *dolce-far-niente* only awakened into anything like vivacity when the renowned tongue of scandal raised its piquant voice. Not that scandal was not rife at Mrs. Baird's. Where has it not a tarrying place?

But her tea was a meal—a meal, too, at which elegance presided not. If, as on the present occasion, Mrs. Baird expected friends, she supplied two plates of thick bread-and-butter instead of one, and ordered a few more cups and saucers of common delf to be placed on the black tea-tray, while she herself presided over the repast behind a hissing urn. The good lady dined at one o'clock, and looked forward to her tea as a great 'refresher,' after the several intermediate hours had been devoted to some erudite and abstruse pamphlet. Of poetry Mrs. Baird was entirely devoid; she imagined that she delighted in the immortal works of some of the great bards, but the sense of appreciation of the beautiful dwelt not in her. Amid the musty atmosphere of her books and papers, there was no effort at producing that streak of beauty which an artistic mind will create for itself, even though its possessor be destined to dwell in a pauper's hovel. Mrs. Baird's home was cold, rigid, matter-of-fact; and yet, notwithstanding its generally repulsive aspect, it was the resort of many who, struggling for literary honours, met there to discuss their common successes, and to give way, as they did, on some more special occasions, at Lady Ida's, to a little literary dissipation.

At the present meeting some three or four people were seated at the table; but the main line of the conversation was being well worked by the mistress of the house, who was addressing herself to a grey-headed, pleasant-looking man, by profession a limner of fair women, but whose success in life had hitherto been but small. He managed to earn his bread and cheese, and might, as far as merit goes, have done better things, if he had had that one influential friend who is so necessary to give every beginner a start in life. Years, however, had passed over him, and the opening had never come; still he was of a cheerful, hopeful temperament, and did not despair. 'Old Dillon,' as his familiars called him, was always on the look-out for the bright day which was yet to dawn.

Just now he was being talked down by his hostess, who was declaiming largely on her favourite topic, 'The Education of Women.'

'You are kept back by their ignorance ; turned into puppets—mere dancing-dolls to keep pace with their frivolity. Pah ! I loathe the sight of those machines calling themselves men, who pass their time talking senseless nothings with a parcel of foolish, empty-headed girls. Educate them, my dear sir, educate them ; make them fit helpmates for man. When God created Eve, it was as a companion to dwell with man on equal terms.'

'Yes, and she fell.'

It was the poet who spoke. He loved Georgie with her little weaknesses, and had moreover a poet's tenderness for frail women.

'She did,' answered Mrs. Baird, as she turned round sharply on him ; 'and through her fall brought all the levity and folly with which the world abounds. Every woman thinks, because she is a daughter of Eve, she is to copy her shortcomings.'

She turned her back on him, and pursued her conversation with her hoary-headed friend—

'To quote one who has written on the subject, after careful thought, "In women we love that which is natural ; we admire that which is acquired ; we shun that which is artificial." And to what does the present system of education lead ? It indeed gives us "all the evil and none of the good ; it presents us with the ignorance of that which is natural without its artlessness, and the cunning of that which is artificial without its acquirements. It gives us little to admire, less to love, and much to despise." Yes, they must be educated, my dear sir ; their heads must be filled with wisdom and knowledge that they may be prevented from dragging men backwards down to the level of their own puerility. You, I feel sure, will feel the force of these remarks, and, for your own sake, must see how earnestly it is to be desired that women should be raised out of their present state of intellectual degradation.'

The pleasant-looking painter felt anything but inclined to agree with Mrs. Baird ; in fact, he was far too great an admirer of true womanliness to wish the entire sex to resemble this stern sister. Besides, though his life had been

a solitary one, he had a vivid recollection of an affectionate and tender mother, at whose knee he had knelt as a child, and who had soothed with loving care the sorrows and trials of his infancy. So, a smile in his honest eyes the while, he merely suggested, in answer to this outbreak, that it were well if Mrs. Baird had been born a man.

A gleam of satisfaction lighted up her face, but no one knew whether it was at the implied compliment, or at the sight of a carriage which at that moment stopped at the door.

Lady Ida had arrived. So bitten was she with the mania for being considered a 'blue,' that she not unfrequently passed an hour in Mrs. Baird's parlour. This time, however, the *r union* was not likely to be as serious and intent on literary matters as usual, for Miss Georgie followed her mother out of the carriage, and, with her fresh young beauty, filled the little dingy room with light.

Mrs. Baird was almost angry.

'To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?' she asked, addressing the young lady with a stiff bow.

'I am tired of dancing, so I have come to learn to be clever.' And she sat down on a formal-looking chair. 'Dear! how very uncomfortable! Why, one can't help being demure on such a seat as this.'

The men of the party immediately offered cushions, footstools, everything the room afforded. The little beauty covered up her face with her delicately-gloved hands in mock confusion.

'Don't look at me or speak to me, please, or Mrs. Baird will send me away; and I have really come to hear how people make clever talk. I want to be initiated in the art—everybody says I am such a fool.'

'Oh, Georgie, you promised to sit quietly, and not speak,' said Lady Ida in a whining tone, 'and now you are convulsing everybody, as you always do, and putting an end to all our intellectual intercourse.'

On the strength of this admonition, Miss Georgie sat very demurely for some minutes, till a little startled-looking man, who had been absorbed in contemplation of her ever since her arrival—for never before had anyone so lovely crossed his path—suddenly recollected that no one was doing the honours of the feast, and thereupon he handed her one of the plates of thick bread-and-butter. At this,

Georgie, whose vein was decidedly comic, went off into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, the silver tones of her clear young voice waking the echoes of that still old house as they had never been awakened before.

‘Georgie, my darling, how can you be so naughty?’ asked her mother.

‘I am very sorry, mama, but you *savans* are so irresistibly funny. You amuse me much more than people do in the great world, where everybody knows how to behave himself. Now do for once condescend to small things, Mrs. Baird, and let us be jolly. Introduce me to your guests; I wish to make, them all, my personal friends. I am sure I should get on with some of them. Mr. Blencowe, I have seen before;’ and she held out her hand to the poet. ‘How are the hexameters getting on?—give them up and write a burlesque—you will succeed far better. In this locomotive age people have not time to be classical.’

‘Georgie, you will make Mrs. Baird seriously angry.’

‘Wherefore, mama? Mrs. Baird has a great deal too much good sense to be angry with me. You know a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump, and I am sure this lump wants leavening, for anything more formal and prim could not be imagined. Some of my nonsense, as you call it, will wake up the general stillness, and I shall be metamorphosed into all sorts of shapes in the next scraps of literature given to the world. Mrs. Baird sees it in that light—don’t you, dear?’ and the little gloved hand was placed gingerly on the hard bony shoulder.

In spite of herself a smile, for a moment, passed over the face of the hard-featured woman.

‘Bravo!’ cried Georgie. ‘I have gained the day; she isn’t a bit angry! I may do as I like; so I am going to have some tea, and a tiny piece of that delicious looking bread-and-butter, by way of becoming initiated. Then, everybody is going to tell me what he or she can do, and so I shall be elected in due form a member of this erudite literary clique. Nonsense is my line; by way of a clever term, suppose we call it *verve comique*. Pray what is yours?’ And she looked across at the startled man.

‘Now, Miss Trant, this is really past enduring!’ said Mrs. Baird, when Georgie paused and gave her the opportunity to speak. ‘Turning those so far superior to your-

self in intellect and literary acquirements thus flagrantly into ridicule is—dear Lady Ida will, I feel sure, excuse me for saying so—is not the action of a gentlewoman, and I must ask my valued friend not to allow our coterie to be again broken in upon in this manner. You ought to be aware, young lady, that they are matters of grave importance which are discussed here—subjects which materially affect the welfare of nations.’

Georgie laughed.

‘Do you remember Æsop’s fable about the fly which sat on the axle-tree of the chariot wheel and said, “What a dust do I raise!” I leave you to point it.’ Then she turned to her mother as she went out of the door, ‘I will remain in the carriage till you are ready, mama. I should be sorry to make any further raid among these brilliant wits. Ta-ta, dear old Baird ; we shall understand each other better some day.’

‘That girl is no fool, if she were only educated, but she is most unpleasantly flippant,’ was Mrs. Baird’s remark, as Georgie tripped off down the tiny garden.

Lady Ida made her friends a lengthy apology for the intrusion of her troublesome daughter, and the even course of their literary discussions being disturbed for that day ; she then took her leave, and the other members of the little coterie following her example, Mrs. Baird was soon left alone with the painter.

‘So that is Lady Ida’s daughter,’ he said, as he pulled one of the horsehair chairs close to the table, and sat down as if for a chat. ‘How is it we have never seen that bright little beauty before? I had no idea Lady Ida was the mother of anything half so lovely!’

‘Beauty is only skin-deep,’ said Mrs. Baird. ‘She is a saucy little minx. For my part, I cannot think how Lady Ida tolerates her impertinences ; if she were my child, I would lock her up on bread and water.’

‘Oh, no, no!’ answered the painter, laughing. “‘A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”—you would delight in her, as Lady Ida does.’

‘Good gracious ! Mr. Dillon, what am I to think?—that a steady-going, middle-aged man like yourself has suddenly become bewitched by that little empty-headed doll?’

‘Not at all! not at all, my dear madam. But I will own her beauty has impressed me—it is so fresh and natural; and as for her being empty-headed, that child is by no means wanting in natural ability.’

‘She is uncultivated—totally ignorant; “her mind is a wilderness, through want of care.” You know what our great Bacon says, “A man’s nature runs either to herbs or weeds; therefore let him seasonably water the one and destroy the other.” Now, Georgie’s mind is neither watered, trained, pruned, nor looked after in any way. I don’t believe she ever opens a book.’

‘The world will be her task-master, and tuition may perhaps come too soon,’ was the answer, given in a grave voice.

‘Well, she gets her amusement out of the world now; she is always dancing and flirting—there is one Clive she raves incessantly about. I can’t think where Lady Ida’s senses are to allow it, but the girl always gets her own way.’

‘She is so taking, I am not surprised. But who is Clive?—was he ever in the States?’

‘That is more than I can tell you. I do not interest myself about her follies, only I hear of Oswald Clive till I am tired of his name.’

‘Oswald!—then it must be the same. Good gracious! is that fair girl on friendly terms with him?’

‘Hoity-toity! Mr. Dillon, why, we are weaving a romance! What do you know about Miss Georgie’s lover?’

‘Nothing—not much, at least,’ and Mr. Dillon looked as if he regretted having been surprised into speaking. ‘I have no right to allude to the past; we have both had to struggle up the social ladder. Clive has probably got to the top. It is not my place to drag him back. Let the aristocrats pick holes in each other’s jackets, we workers from among the people should give a hand in all good faith to our brother-toilers.’

‘That is true enough,’ said Mrs. Baird. ‘You are an honest man, Mr. Dillon; and there are few such to be met with in these days, goodness knows! Let each bear his own burden. If we were to interfere between Miss Georgie and Mr. Clive, flippant answers and no thanks would be our only recompense.’

‘What is he doing now?’ asked Mr. Dillon—‘by way of a profession, I mean?’

‘Nothing, I should think. He seems to spend his time gadding about at all the lords’ and ladies’ great entertainments. What did he do in the States?’

Mr. Dillon laughed.

‘That is a difficult question to answer,’ he said; ‘a little of all sorts, so that money came to the fore. I should rather like to see him, but perhaps he would wish to avoid me now.’

‘Afraid his antecedents might be raked up—eh?’

‘Well, we won’t say any more about him at present. Will you take me to Lady Ida’s next soirée?’ asked Dillon.

‘Oh! indeed, are you going to turn defaulter at my social board, in order to worship at that wax doll’s feet?’

The clever American widow had got just a little bit of an almost unacknowledged liking for painter Dillon.

‘Far be it from my thoughts, my dear madam; but my curiosity has been somewhat excited by the little episode of to-day; besides, from a business point of view, I think a portrait of that fair girl hung next year, in a good light, on the Academy walls might be of £ s. d. benefit to me.

‘Ah! well, the main chance must not be wholly disregarded, notwithstanding the great longing which we both have to see Art and Literature reign triumphant in the land. I will do my best to get you introduced at Lady Ida’s,’ said the widow, as she shook hands with this, the last of her guests.





CHAPTER III.

THE TWICKENHAM VILLA.

ON the banks of the river, near Twickenham, there is to be found, nestling among fresh green trees, a calm, tranquil retreat, a little home of love and poetry. The crimson beauty of the setting sun shines in full gorgeousness on the water, which flows on its pellucid way beneath the windows, radiant with those thousand varieties of colour that art, with all its wondrous power, can but so feebly copy from nature.

On a sofa in the drawing-room, sufficiently in the shadow not to be inconvenienced by the bright light, there is lounging a listless female form. No work or books are scattered about, as though they had been recently used, but she who has thrown herself down to revel in the departing sunlight is lying there in almost statuesque stillness. Her head is resting on her folded arms, while her thoughts are evidently wandering far away; and she is either poring over some present worry, or dreaming over the history of some by-gone event, pregnant with individual interest. Girlhood had passed, but only to be succeeded by the fuller charms and richer graces of womanhood—and Mathilde d'Aubigné, as she lies there in the sunlight, is seen to no mean advantage. The faultless symmetry of her figure is set off by a dark blue dress, irreproachable in fit and form, its full colour contrasting with the pure whiteness of her delicate throat. And she is beautiful—of that rich beauty which consists in warm colouring and passionate expression. Masses of auburn hair crown her head in well-trained profusion; her eyes are large and restless—they seem to tell of the incessant wanderings of her thoughts to scenes and events where those with whom she lives in daily contact cannot

follow her ; while her large full lips reveal the existence of strong passions, which education and circumstances may, perchance, keep in control, but which, nevertheless, burn with latent force, subject to the ebb and flow of their owner's will. At length, with a start and a shake, as though she would jerk off some disagreeable impression, she raises herself, brought back again, as it were on a sudden, to a participation in the scenes of actual life by a loud ringing at the outer bell. Scarcely has she had time to arrange herself in an attitude of negligent ease when the door opens softly, and Mr. Clive walks unannounced into the room.

‘At last, Mr. Clive ! I thought you had forgotten your way to this quiet little nook.’ And she gave him her hand with the easy familiarity of an old friend. ‘Now sit down and amuse me, for I am weary, weary, weary. I sit and look at that dreamy water, shimmering on for ever and for aye, till my every sense seems stagnated.’

‘Why you stop here I can’t conceive. A woman with your attractions ought not to be buried in this out-of-the-way retreat. Any other than yourself would start off at once for Paris.’

‘Nonsense ! That other, being burdened with the same circumstances as myself, would do as I do—wait. To quote Talleyrand—“*Le commencement de la fin*” is near at hand, and then——’

‘But how you can wait so quietly is a mystery to me. Is there no feeling of rebellion in that little fluttering heart ? To one who has seen you as I have, giving way to the delicious madness of some strong excitement, and revelling in its pleasures, this present calm is almost incomprehensible.’

She laughed a little, low, soft laugh that fell like music on the ear.

‘You do not know the power of will of which I am capable. I have lain for many a long hour, and weighed rebellion and obedience in a pair of golden scales ; and perfect quiescence for the present, at least, has always borne down heaviest in the balance. So having made a compact with myself to let common sense triumph for once, I am bound not to break it.’

He took her hand caressingly.

‘But what makes you think an end is coming ? As far

as my eye can reach, good strong fences seem to hedge you in on every side.'

'There is a gap—there is a gap ; but until it widens, you are too blind to see it without spectacles. No, no, leave me to my own devices for the present. And now tell me, how are you getting on in town ? You know I take a vivid interest in your proceedings. Have you smashed any more butterfly existences, as you did at Spa ? Poor Flora, I wonder if she has forgiven and forgotten you.'

'Ah ! how can you allude to those horrors thus slightly ?' And a shiver passed over him.

'Oh ! I daresay she will get another lover soon—comfort yourself. You know La Rochefoucauld's maxim, "Quand on a le cœur encore agité par les restes d'une passion, on est plus près d'en prendre une nouvelle que quand on est entièrement guéri."'

And there was a dare-devil look in the large eyes, before which even he blanched, and felt he would rather be her friend than her foe. She laughed again that soft, low laugh which had so much music in it, and laid her white hand on his shoulder.

'Have you been up late at night lately, *amico* ? Your nerves seem somewhat shaken.'

'Let us change the conversation,' he said, hurriedly. 'Why will you, who are so good and gentle, always try to torture me by referring to the one only episode in my life I cannot bear to look back on ?'

'Because it is the only link that binds us together,' she answered, in a calm undertone.

'A link of crime !' he muttered. 'Can Heaven smile on it ?'

She started to her feet, and her large eyes flashed.

'Good heavens ! is this the return for my devotion ? Did I save you, at the risk of my own reputation, simply to see you shake and shiver over bygone recollections every time we meet ? I did not think you were such a drivelling coward, Oswald Clive !'

'Coward I am none,' he answered, rousing himself as if with an effort. 'I have faced dangers, battled with difficulties, and flinched never. Since I fled from my father's house, dreading his just anger for having a second time incurred a mass of heavy debts, I have lived solely by my wits—now

luxuriating in princely splendour, now doing all but beg for the next day's bread.'

'Begging!—no, that you would never descend to; but stealing is nothing!—a gentlemanlike vice, which is mildly called speculation.'

'Hush! don't call things by hard names. Granted that I have made use of chicanery and humbug to obtain the gold without which I should have died, I have only put myself in the wake of others. It was a fair encounter; they might do the like by me. If I came off the winner, why, the more fools they. But that night at Spa—oh! Mathilde, do you know I start sometimes in my sleep, and see those horrors enacted again before my eyes!'

'The result of bad wine and late suppers, I should imagine. Instead of nursing a morbid feeling of remorse for what Kismet had arranged long before you were born, you should thank the lucky star which shone over your birthplace, and brought my timely aid, to instil a little spirit and manliness into you, and bring you back to the regions of beauty and plenty.'

'I thank you from the bottom of my heart,' he murmured, 'but still I can never forget those haunting horrors.'

'Well, let us talk of other matters; you are too childish to be bearable to-night. That lazy, dreamy water is a better companion than you are when you have one of your evil moods on you. Why don't you pick up a flirtation, and amuse yourself with a little harmless love-making?'

'And this *you* suggest in sober earnest?' and he looked at her askance.

'Well, why not?—it would do you worlds of good. You need not get into any serious entanglement, you know. Upon my word, I think the lively sallies of some witty woman would drive all this nonsense out of your head sooner than anything—that is to say, if you are clever enough to pick out for preference a good specimen of Eve's daughters.'

'I never supposed you would have allowed the place of friend to be supplied by another. I am indeed disappointed.' But there was a manifest tone of relief in the way in which these words were uttered, which showed how little they spoke the truth.

'Look here, Mr. Clive. For once and for ever let us understand each other. The friendship which for some

months has existed between us, has—I see it full well—dragged itself, as far as any warm feeling on your part is concerned, to its last limits. That I cared for you, God knows, or I should not have risked what I did to serve you ; but the, perhaps, wicked love which prompted me to set at nought every conventionality for your sake has had its own punishment. You mix me up in all your recollections of that night of horror which you would fain forget, and the very sight of me is loathsome to you. Nay, do not speak,’ and she put out her hand to stop him as he rose as though to expostulate. ‘I am your friend till death; in weal or in woe I will serve you. You know, or ought to know, that a woman can be constant to the one great passion of her life—pah ! don’t interrupt me. It has died out, but among its embers you may build your faith in my promises. Now go, and without fancying that you are robbing me of my right, lay your prettiest nothings at sweet Georgie’s feet. Oh ! you need not start. You see, I know your secrets. She may amuse you for a time, but I should not think you would be fool enough to trouble about her for long. However, that is your affair, not mine. Now I have said my say, and you have not a word to answer—so much the better ; we will revert to the subject no more, and when we meet—well, the less we meet in future the wiser for both.’

‘Oh ! I cannot bear to part thus ! Tell me, what are you going to do ?’

‘Wait here till my husband chooses to behave himself. Oh ! you need not look surprised. I have the spirit of endurance very strongly developed, and I shall be quite’—‘happy,’ she was going to say, but she gulped the word up with a sort of choke, and substituted ‘resigned in this quiet nook, for the Summer, at least. I shall have the papers, you know, and an occasional whisper from the great world ;’ and she laughed with a gay carelessness, as a child would who looks forward to a fair day for some bright fête.

‘Can I believe my senses ?—is all this true ?’ almost gasped Oswald Clive. ‘How I have been deceived ! You can never really have loved me !’

Like all men, he could not bear any wound inflicted on his vanity. He longed to throw off the shackles of a worn-out passion, which bored and tortured him, but he did not like the release to come from the woman.

She threw herself back on the sofa, as though to hide a sort of tremulous working of her frame, as she answered, with a forced expression of gaiety—

‘Love you !—well, the love having died out does not testify the less that it burned fiercely while it lasted. Perhaps this fair Georgie may love you longer and better ; if she does, come and let me know—but mind you give her a fair trial first. Now, as it is getting dark, and I do not wish the gossips of this small neighbourhood to pull my reputation to rags and tatters, suppose we say, ‘good-bye,’ and she held out her hand.

He bent over it and kissed it.

‘Mathilde, I cannot leave you thus,’ he murmured.

She started up. ‘You must—you shall, if I wish it !’ Then, changing her tone to a light, bantering one, ‘Don’t grow sentimental—it’s mawkish, and bores one to death. Come, be off, for it is really very late. If you are hard up, let me know. I may not be able to help you long, but for the time being I am not a pauper.’

He saw it was useless to linger, and so beat as gracefully a retreat as might be, leaving Madame d’Aubigné standing by the window, gazing with her large gleaming eyes out on the rapidly-increasing darkness, as its shades crept up on all sides, and stole, with a sort of mysterious awe, over the lowly murmuring waters.

She stood thus immovable for some minutes, leaning her forehead, as though to cool its fevered heat, against the cold glass of the window, until she heard the horse which was to bear Mr. Clive back to town trotting quickly from the door ; then she turned sharply round.

‘Well, if all other ventures fail, I can become an actress. There’s some comfort in knowing of what one’s powers are capable,’ she said, and she laughed, but the music was all gone out of the sharp metallic ring which now echoed through the darkness. ‘He has taken his dismissal like a man. What a fool I was to risk so much for him ! But self-recrimination is a mistake. We have not done with one another yet, Oswald Clive !’ and she sat down once more on the sofa, and buried her face.

For some time nothing was heard in the room save the ticking of the large French clock on the mantleshef. Once, something like a sob burst from among the sofa

cushions ; but even in solitude and darkness Mathilde d'Aubigné would not allow her heart to triumph long over her head. She rose and rang for a light ; and when the old servant, who had nursed her in his arms as a child, placed it on the table, and looked up in his young mistress's face, the storm had passed ; the large eyes beamed kindly on him as they were wont, and the ' Bring some coffee, Jerome—I have letters to write to-night,' had no shade of either bitterness or sorrow in its tones. No one would ever have guessed what weeks of self-reasoning, what wakeful nights the last half hour's conversation had cost her. But the worst was over now, and as she sipped her coffee, and sat with her pen in her hand, dreaming over the paper, she felt she had decided wisely so far. She had undertaken to fight out, herself, with her own weapons, the great battle of life, and this was the onset. Oswald Clive was an obstacle in the field-chart her busy brain had of late been mapping out, and he must be removed for a time. A strong presentiment that they could never be total strangers to each other made it perhaps less hard to send him thus from her side. There was that in both their past lives which linked them strongly to each other, and she looked on Georgie as a harmless plaything for the time being.

Madame d'Aubigné's had been a strange life. She was the daughter of an old French general, who had married, when advanced in years, a somewhat faded English beauty, with more brains than reputation, and more extravagant tastes than money wherewith to satisfy them. He only lived till his young daughter was about three years old ; and then he died, and left her and her mother almost penniless. Perhaps the only thing the mother really loved was that bright, beauteous little Mathilde ; yet the child was early initiated in the ways and habits of a fast, independent life, and she was an apt scholar. At the age of sixteen, to save herself and her mother from starvation, she had contracted a marriage with M. d'Aubigné, the somewhat imbecile son of a rich manufacturer at Lyons. The marriage had turned out a blank. His friends were infuriated at his *mésalliance* with a young adventuress, as they called Mathilde, and tormented her with every petty annoyance that ingenuity could possibly suggest. The husband, like many others whose intellects are below par, had the bump

of malignity and brutality pretty strongly developed ; but Mathilde swallowed the affronts, and fought with the indignities. Her strong will never faltered when an object was to be gained ; for her mother's sake she bore it all. If there were contempt and scorn, there was at least gold.

But at last her mother died, and Mathilde gave in. She packed up her jewels and all the money she could find, and one fine morning left her husband's roof for Spa. For herself she preferred independence, and for the rest, 'Where there are brains there cannot be actual want,' was Mathilde's maxim. Nevertheless, she was anxious to come to some practical arrangement with her husband. He could not find fault with her on any subject, but for the one reason that she had left him. She was unaccompanied by any one save old Jerome, who had served her father through many a campaign, and had all an old soldier's devotion for his daughter, whom he looked on almost as his charge.

For some time Madame d'Aubigné led a sufficiently quiet, humdrum life to satisfy even the most exacting of husband's relations ; then the money fell short, or the love of play awoke, and startled common-sense away for a time, and she appeared daily at the gaming tables, taking no very inactive part in the exciting contest. There she met Oswald Clive, and for the first time in her life she felt there was a passion stronger, when it once takes possession of the senses, than the mere love of riches and personal power can ever prove. For some time she gave herself up to the delirium of that wild, mad love ; but the spell by which she held him was at last ruthlessly snapped. Spa became no longer a safe dwelling-place for either of them, and they fled to England.

Away from the excitement of this wild, adventurous sort of life, prudence once more visited Madame d'Aubigné, and she turned her thoughts to her husband and his relations. What an exaggerated account of this scandal must have reached them ! That separate maintenance, too, on which she had so set her heart, how much farther off the madness of the last few months had driven it. Thus she plied her fertile brain, in order to fall, if possible, on some plan whereby to retrieve the lost time ; and the first act must be to banish from her presence, for a while, at least, the hero of this wilful little episode. Then she sat down to write a

letter to her husband's sister ; she had ever been the only one of the family who, somewhat fascinated by Mathilde's beauty, had more or less warmly advocated her cause. And late on in the night she sat, weaving a history of the doings of the last few months which should assimilate sufficiently with known facts to bear on its surface an appearance of truth—place Mathilde in the light of the aggrieved rather than the aggressor, and awaken, if possible, a feeling of sorrow for her false position. Then the long missive had to be copied. Quick and clever as she was, there is an old saying that they must have good memories who would be professional equivocators, and Mathilde had no wish to forget her lesson. At last her evening's work was done, and she shut her writing-book with a yawn.

'If this prove unsuccessful, the next step must be a bolder one,' she said, as she lighted a candle ; 'but I sincerely trust I shall not have to play the saint in this stupid English village long. I must buy a black dress and quiet bonnet to-morrow, in case my precious sister-in-law should accept my invitation, and come to see me in my prison.'





CHAPTER IV.

COUNTRY QUARTERS.

I AM very nearly at my last gasp—bored to extinction. *Ennui*—that detestable weed which they say is a root of English growth—has poisoned every fibre in my body. For goodness sake, do or say something amusing, somebody!’ and Miss Georgie Trant stretched herself, as she rose out of an arm-chair in which she had been indulging in forty winks, and then began to play at ball with a pair of garden gloves, which, with her hat, had been lying for some time past in her lap.

‘There is nobody here but me,’ said a quiet little voice, proceeding from the depths of a book in the farther corner of a pretty, bright boudoir.

Georgie looked round, and saw that the only other occupant of the room was a shy girl of about seventeen, who was seated on a footstool in one of the windows, absorbed in some favourite book.

‘Where has everybody gone?’ asked Georgie, fairly bewildered that she had slept away some three or four people whom she had expected still to have seen round her.

‘Down to the village to see the schools. Lady Ida wanted to investigate the new system, and Sir Henry desired me to tell you that he thought it would probably bore you, so he would not allow them to wake you.’

‘I should think not, indeed!—return with a sudden jerk from a peep into dreamland to hear a parcel of dirty little brats say their multiplication table! I should not have forgiven him for a month. You are always reading, Glory. Put your book away, can’t you? and come and talk to me.’

The young girl did as she was bid, and came and knelt

down beside Georgie's chair. Although they had only been acquainted four or five days, a sort of affinity, scarcely amounting to a friendship, had been established between them, owing its birth, probably, to a striking contrast of character.

Glory Fane was an orphan, the child of Sir Henry Wilbraham's first cousin. Partly as a companion to his mother, who was much alone during his frequent absences, partly out of a desire that she might receive proper care and education, Sir Henry had offered her a home, and she was now thoroughly domesticated—a member of the well-regulated but somewhat monotonous household at Brinck Hall, as Sir Henry's place in Hampshire had been called for many generations. A long-standing friendship existed between Lady Ida Trant and Lady Wilbraham, although they had seen but little of each other for some years past. Lady Wilbraham had always been more or less of an invalid, and had led a quiet, humdrum life in the country, amusing herself with village schools, poor people, and numberless little charitable schemes—in fact, she was the Lady Bountiful of the neighbourhood, and, good, methodical old body as she was, understood none of the wild vagaries in which Lady Ida allowed her mind to run riot—nor was she at all versed in that sort of superficial literary cant in which Lady Ida so freely indulged. Yet in childhood they had been friends ; and, as we know full well, our childish intimacies cling to us and awaken pleasurable recollections, even in the darkest and most varied passages of after-life ; so, influenced by these old memories, it was a true pleasure to Lady Wilbraham when her son told her that, at the end of the London season, she might expect her old friend and her daughter to spend a few weeks at Brinck Hall.

‘Well, Glory, do you ever feel bored?’ asked Georgie, as she smoothed back the hair off the brow of the young girl who knelt beside her. ‘Look up, child, can't you? You always keep your eyes half shut ; yet, when by chance you open them, they are worth looking at, too—there, that is better. I'll trouble you, in future, always to look me straight in the face.’

Glory blushed crimson under this scrutiny. Her companion laughed.

‘You little fool ! she said ; ‘if you can't stand my gaze,

who am but a weak daughter of Mother Eve like yourself, how will you stand all the masculine eye-glasses which will be brought to bear on you when you take your first drive past Fop's Corner?'

'Where is Fop's Corner?' and the two eyes that were so often hidden under their long lashes looked up inquiringly.

'You unsophisticated country mouse! It is the most brilliant spot in the Park, where all the handsomest and best-dressed men hang about, glass in eye, cane in hand, bouquet in button-hole, to pass their small judgments on the reigning goddesses of the day, as, lounging back in their carriages, they drive luxuriously past them.'

'Now, Miss Trant, it is too bad of you to bring your inventive powers to bear on poor little ignorant me!'

'Upon my word, it is true,' cried Georgie, now fairly amused. 'Ask Sir Henry if it is not.'

Glory shook her head.

'He never talks about London to me. You have told me more than any one has, about the great world. I am sure I hope I shall never go there; I should be frightened to death.'

'What a child you are!' said Georgie, laughing. 'Perhaps I shall be married by the time you come out, and you will be quite safe under my chaperonage.'

'You are only a year older than I am.'

'But then I have seen the world, little rural.' And Georgie stood up, and tried to look dignified and patronising; then she drew her arm round her companion.

'Never mind, Glory,—

What mortal his own doom may know?
Let none despond—let none despair.'

Each, in our own way of life, we shall make the best of it, I daresay. Only, let me *see* and feel the ball rolling; I don't like to have merely a hearsay knowledge of locomotion.'

'And I should be quite happy here, among my flowers, my books, and my painting. Lady Wilbraham says that society at best is only flurry and worry.'

'That is a neat term, too, by which to designate some of the happiest, wildest, dizziest moments of one's life. Well, from what I have seen of country life, I should call it prim

and trim, and very trying to the temper. But here come the educationists. Now my lady mother has caught a hobby horse which she will ride unweariedly for the rest of the evening. I must give Sir Henry a hint to stop her, or I shall be compelled to go to bed at eight o'clock.'

Slowly up the hill, along a winding path which led up to the house from the village at its base, might now be seen wending its way the party of people who had been devoting the last hour to taking notes of the state of village intellect. It consisted of the two chaperons, accompanied by Sir Henry Wilbraham and the curate of the parish, the Rev. Mr. Turner.

'The parson, by all that is holy !' cried Georgie, as she spied him out in the distance. 'Now, this is really too much ! What can have possessed Sir Henry to bring that tame little bird home again. I am sure we had enough of him yesterday to last for a lifetime. Is he the only man in the neighbourhood, Glory ?'

'We have not many visitors here,' said Glory, quietly. 'I rather like Mr. Turner, he plays so well.'

'Poor little bird, it must indeed be let out of its cage, if it can coo with such a mate as that,' and Georgie kissed the child's smooth brow, and stroked her hair down lovingly. 'So that little meek animal, with his Savonarola face and Roman collar, is your ideal of manly excellence, *pozerina*.'

'You are too bad, Miss Trant, indeed you are,' and the bright blush of youthful innocence mantled the fair young face. 'I only said I liked Mr. Turner to play, and when you hear him I am sure you will like it too.'

Georgie laughed and shook her head.

'Don't let me see him, then, doing the performance, if you wish me to appreciate it,' and she sprang out of the window to meet the party, which was now close to the house.

'I hope you have all been edified by your examination into the state of rural progress ?' she said.

'Oh, Georgie, I wish you had been with us !' exclaimed Lady Ida. 'The schools are models of perfection ; and as for the children, I couldn't have answered the questions which were put to them better myself. When I look forward to what the rising generation must become from all that is being done for it, both morally and intellectually, a thrill of pleasure fills my veins. All this high-pressure

training must succeed with the mind, in the same way that care and cultivation change the meek field-flower into a brilliant exotic.'

'Don't get excited, mother mine,' said Georgie, taking Lady Ida's arm within hers; 'There will always be weeds like me in the world. Fancy me in a hot-house, having my brains forced! The bare idea is painful to contemplate.'

'Now do be quiet, and don't talk nonsense, Georgie. I want to get a little more information from Sir Henry about these schools. I do not know why we should not start some on a similar plan in London. I might superintend the whole concern, and it would give you some very desirable employment if you were to take an active part under my direction.'

Georgie started back from her mother with a jump, and burst into a saucy laugh.

'I? You really mean me to teach in a school? You can't have much regard for the children's proprieties, or you would not trust me with their juvenile training.'

'And why not, Miss Trant?' asked Sir Henry, now speaking for the first time; 'it was only the other day I heard you express a wish to be useful.'

'Oh, that is your idea of a woman's duty—now I know; but let me tell you that I do not in the least appreciate the work. Teach a lot of little dirty brats their letters, indeed! No, Sir Henry, it is not my vocation, and it never will be.'

Sir Henry turned away somewhat uneasily, and made some passing observation to the curate. He felt sorry he had spoken. To bring Georgie within the fold of those who devote their lives to model schools, baths and wash-houses, soup-kitchens, blanket emporiums, et cætera, et cætera, was the greatest desire he had in life; but he felt she must be drawn into it gradually, not frightened by large projects, or disgusted by over-doses of propriety.

'Mama's last mania was an improvement on this one,' continued Georgie, nothing daunted by the sort of disapproving expression which she saw on every face. 'I suppose you know she wishes to establish a *crèche*, on the French system, and I am to hold the important post of lollipop purveyor to slobbering babies, with the one restriction that I am not to be required to touch them. Won't it be fun, practising to take shots at their mouths from an easy distance?'

‘Georgie, Georgie, when will you cease to turn everything serious into ridicule?’ asked the fond mother’s gentle voice.

‘Soon enough, mother, never fear. The hey-day and the glorious sunshine won’t last for ever—don’t grudge me its passing brightness. Now, Sir Henry, come and show me the new croquet-lawn, as you promised. I know mama is dying to talk statistics to Lady Wilbraham: how twelve mothers can gain 10s. each per week, if their sixteen brats are kept at the *crèche*, at an outlay of say a shilling a week each.’

And away Georgie went with Sir Henry—he nothing loth to have her bright smiles and saucy sayings to himself for a brief space. There was a strong love springing up in his heart for this dazzling little beauty, and he saw much good feeling and a warm under-current of love and tenderness lurking beneath her dashing, off-hand manner. Now, Sir Henry was somewhat of a formalist; he was a thorough Englishman, and had a good deal of bigotry and love of conventionality about him. Strange he should be attracted by this wild, careless Georgie, on whom proprieties and forms made no impression. Probably it was this very marked difference in their natures which had drawn him insensibly to her. But Sir Henry was by no means prepared to cast his title and his fortune at her feet, and, in the event of her accepting them, to take to himself the good gift the gods had prepared for him, in the person of this wild, spirited little girl. No, before Georgie could take her place among the county swells as Lady Wilbraham she must be educated, those sharp sayings of hers must have their naughty little necks broken, those stinging darts must be blunted. ‘Conventionality’ must become the watchword of her life. All that was bright and genial about her must be flung away, and only as the broken-spirited shadow of her former self would she be a fit mistress for Brinck Hall. This was Sir Henry’s theory, for even he, sensible man though he was, had a theory about women. The fact of the matter was, his reason had taught him to wish for a practical wife; his heart, that unfathomable enigma, had strayed, without leave, after a very unpractical one. Georgie he wanted, Georgie, if it were possible, he must have; and the more she teased him with her naughty ways, and shocked the proprieties by

her rash remarks, the more closely was he entangled in her meshes, until he owned to himself that life would not be worth having without Georgie. But then the mental reservation always came, that it must be a Georgie purified from these strange manners, which savoured more of Bohemia than Belgravia. So Sir Henry Wilbraham turned school-master ; but the lot of a Dominie Sampson is not, and never will be, an easy one ; and so the practical Baronet found it, when he began his work of striving to educate this wild little maid up to the proper standard for taking her wife's degree.

So they sauntered together through the pretty grounds, which wore the gala dress of summer.

'How wretched this place must be in winter !' quoth Georgie, as she looked round on the fair scene. 'But I suppose nobody ever stays in the country in winter, save cottagers and servants.'

Sir Henry smiled.

'My mother and Glory live here all the year round ; and, for myself, I think I prefer the country in winter. You forget the hunting, Miss Trant.'

'Oh ! ah, yes—if you hunt, that produces a pleasing excitement. If I had to live altogether in the country I should hunt. Now pray don't look grave, as if you disapproved of ladies hunting ; I am sure lots of girls *do* hunt.'

'There is no particular harm in it,' said Sir Henry ; but I think it is rather a dangerous pastime for women.'

'Well, better to have one's neck broken, and have done with it, than to be boxed up in a country-house in the winter with nothing on earth to do but to look at dreary, leafless trees.'

'My dear Miss Trant, you forget that a country life brings its pursuits as well as a town life.'

'I have no doubt whatever of the fact ; but that they are very uncongenial ones is equally a truth.'

'Ah ! I hope a day may come when you will enter more fully into the pleasures and advantages of country life.'

'Never, Sir Henry !—I tell you never ! When you talked to me in London about duty, occupation, and all that sort of thing, I gave the matter due consideration for twenty-four whole hours, and I came to the conclusion that a life by rule and rote would kill me. I am not constitutionally

formed to stand it, and I won't try it. You cannot think how earnestly I wish I had been born a vagabond.'

'You would soon get tired of the ups and downs of an erratic life. It is very well to read about and dream about, but I should not think it very pleasant in reality.'

'You staid people, who live in the country with your pigs and potatoes, must have very contented minds. For my part, I should hate it.'

'Oh! no, you would not, if you once made up your mind to try it.'

'Well, that I certainly shall never do. Become a "bucolic," indeed—faugh! I would rather turn dancing-girl in a booth at a fair.'

A visible shade of annoyance passed over Sir Henry's face.

'My dear Miss Trant,' he said, 'you do yourself an injustice when you talk in this strain, for I feel certain you do not mean it.'

'I do—I do!' she cried, with a sort of bravado manner; 'and I am sure the country has not improved you, Sir Henry. I liked you much better in London; you used to be jolly and ready for some fun, in a mild way; now you have turned Mentor with a vengeance, and, let me tell you, it is a bore. In future, have the goodness to deal out your sermons to me in homœopathic doses, or we shall cease to be friends, and I shall take to my room and French novels. Oh! this is the croquet-lawn, smooth and level—yes, not bad on the whole. Why don't you give a croquet-party to inaugurate it?'

'If you wish it,' he said, quietly; 'I daresay you are dull and tired of us. I had hoped you would have been happier here, Miss Trant.' And there was an aggrieved tone in his voice.

'I am perfectly happy when I am allowed to say what I like, go where I like, and do as I like. Of course in the country one's wings are rather clipped; but in hot weather activity is not very desirable; so don't worry about me, I shall do very well for the present.'

'Provided no one finds fault with certain wild flights and strange sayings.'

'Just so—as well try to turn the tide as to change my nature. Those who don't like me as I am may leave me, as I don't intend to be broken in.'

‘We all like you very much,’ answered her companion. ‘Nowhere will you find warmer friends than at Brinck Hall ; and, for myself, you remember our compact of old ?’

‘I do ; but that compact included another—that I was to receive no advice, only friendship, and to be allowed to be as imprudent as I liked. But the sun is very hot ; let us go in and write invitations for a croquet-party. If you are very well behaved, I will be your partner in a match ; for you are a dear good old fellow, after all, though you are a wee bit censorious sometimes.’ And the little coquette put her tiny hand on his arm, and looked up at him with her bright, merry eyes.

He had been annoyed, provoked, disappointed with her for the last ten minutes, but she had made her little fight and conquered. He was her devoted slave once more, and for some time, at least, would not persecute her with grave looks or disapproving remarks, when she pursued her wayward unconventionalities.





CHAPTER V.

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST.

BEFORE a large cheval glass in her own room, pretty Georgie is surveying herself with a very un-mixed feeling of satisfaction. With all Georgie's vague ideas about propriety, and her longings for a Bohemian life, she never neglects a due regard to her personal appearance. Come upon her as unexpectedly as you will, she always looks well-dressed and *chic*. But to-day there has been even a greater amount of care than usual bestowed on the general effect, and Georgie is attired for the croquet-party in the freshest and simplest of blue toilettes, with just one modest rosebud put somewhere under her tiny bonnet, among the waves of her fair hair, to give a colour to the picture.

'Yes, I shall do a great deal too well,' was the young lady's mental comment, as she turned round and round to scan herself from every point of view. 'I wonder why I have got myself up so carefully! There will be no one here worth captivating—Sir Henry, I am sorry to say, is done for already. I am sure I am in a state of terror every hour of my life lest he should ask me to become the mistress of this dull old Hall; and mama and Aunt Sophy would say I was such a fool, if I made him a pretty curtsy and modestly declined. No, the evil hour must be put off somehow. Well, after all, there is a degree of excitement in that. Come in,' for there was a little knock at the door just as she gave another pirouette in front of the looking-glass.

'Oh! Glory, here you are! Going to nestle yourself under my fostering wing?—that is right, child. How well you look!—virginal white; there is nothing like it for sweet

seventeen. Now, if you will only keep your eyes open, instead of blinking and winking like an owl in the sunlight, you will get lots of admiration.'

'Oh ! Miss Trant, if I did not think Sir Henry would be angry, I would go to my own room and stay there till all these people are gone.'

'Pooh ! you will be the merriest of the merry by-and-by. Come along, I hear voices and carriages in the distance ; let us go and see the world, country mouse.'

And they went down into the drawing-room together, where Sir Henry and his mother were talking to the few of their guests who had already arrived. He advanced to meet Georgie, who, full of her own importance as self-constituted chaperon to Glory, sailed into the room, looking very demure and staid ; and Sir Henry smiled as he thought if Georgie were always as dignified and composed as at this moment, she would indeed be all that could be wished for in a wife. He bestowed on her a long, earnest look, and then presented her with a small bouquet of hot-house flowers, which had evidently been prepared with great care.

'What am I to do with these?' she asked, looking at him in a vacant sort of way.

'Wear them, for my sake,' was the almost whispered answer.

'Oh, Sir Henry, that is quite impossible ; you don't know what you are asking. Spoil my whole toilette with those variegated flowers. No, I am too much of an artiste for that. Here, Glory, you have them. You want something bright to relieve your white dress. There, that is lovely !—let me pin them in for you. I hate natural flowers, too ; they always make me feel faint.'

Sir Henry looked seriously hurt and annoyed, but he made no observation—only walked away to the farther end of the room.

'Oh, Miss Trant, I cannot wear these flowers. Sir Henry is quite angry. Why will you not keep them?'

'Because I don't choose. Sir Henry is not an Emperor that he should have everything his own way ; a little contradiction will do him a world of good.'

'But you ought not to have given them to me. I shall be quite unhappy about it all day.'

'Glory, don't be such a fool. Wear those flowers. I

insist on it, or I shall not speak to you again during the entire time I am in this delightful old den.'

And the weaker mind gave in to the stronger one, and the flowers were left to adorn Glory's white attire.

'There comes your Curate, child—are you going to allow yourself to be appropriated for the rest of the day? I wonder whom I shall get to flirt with? What fun to have a new range to choose from! I must get some one, for Sir Henry won't trouble me, I fancy, till he has recovered from that little stab.'

'Glory opened her eyes wide enough now, as, in her fresh young innocence, she wondered over Miss Trant's strange behaviour. Georgie laughed at her bewilderment.

'Oh! I am not going to quarrel with him, only when great friends begin to flirt, it should be stopped at once, or something disagreeable is sure to follow. How do you do, Mr. Turner? I am going down to the croquet-lawn; you and Miss Fane can do as you like.'

And off went Georgie in her rapid independent way out of the drawing-room window. She had dismissed Sir Henry, who she felt had intended to be her cavalier for the day, and as she was unacquainted with most of the guests at Brinck Hall, she promenaded about for some time entirely by herself, making observations on the assemblage, and deciding in her own mind which people she would know and which she would avoid among the throng. When she occasionally stumbled on some one to whom she had been previously introduced, a careless nod was the only mark of recognition she bestowed on them, and 'How pretty Miss Trant is, but how very odd!' was the not unfrequent remark her behaviour elicited.

'Will you come and play croquet, Miss Trant?' asked Mr. Turner, with whom Georgie fell in for the second time during her rambles. 'Lady Wilbraham has sent me to look for you.'

'No, thanks, not yet; the sun is too hot, and the people too cold; when the heat has changed positions there will be more amusement, at less expense to one's brain.'

'Shall I take you into the refreshment tent?'

'Thank you, no. I am quite happy where I am, for the present. Pray don't let me keep you from your game.'

He lifted his hat and walked away, wondering how any-

one could have any patience with that pert girl. So, quite regardless of what anyone might think or do, she sauntered on alone, till the tones of a well-known voice fell on her ear.

Happiness was born a twin ;
He who joy would win must share it.

‘Are you an exception to the received dogma?’

All the colour passed out of Georgie’s face at these words, and she turned to look at the speaker.

‘You here?’ she said softly ; ‘why, where on earth did you come from?’

‘If the surprise my sudden presence has occasioned gives you the least pleasure, I am repaid for a long journey, and various inconveniences too worrying to mention.’

She held out her hand and laughed ; her spirits speedily recovered their natural bent.

‘It is always pleasant to meet a friend in a desert,’ she said. ‘I was wondering whom I should get to amuse me, and the gods have sent you.’

‘Don’t give me too large a dose of flattery at a time—it might nauseate. I shall tell all my friends, if they want compliments, not to come to you.’

‘How do you know I might not be more generous to them? But, joking apart, Mr. Clive, this is a very unexpected meeting, and my curiosity requires to be told how it comes about.’

‘Nothing is simpler,’ he said, as he gave her his arm ; and Georgie, no longer doomed to solitary speculation about the idlers on the croquet-lawn, marched off with her companion towards an inviting little wood close by. ‘The fact is, I have a sister living not ten miles from here. I have not seen her since I was a boy, but hearing in town of this festivity at Brinck Hall, I thought I would stir up her sisterly affection a little. I arrived very unexpectedly yesterday, was received like the prodigal, and here I am.’

‘You have a sister in the neighbourhood? I did not think you——’

‘Go on, Miss Trant—were half so respectable, you were going to say. Pray don’t allow yourself to be deceived on that score. There is nothing respectable about me, except my father’s name. He, poor old gentleman, was

just and honest in all his dealings, as the Catechism says—strange he should have such a good-for-nothing son.'

'Now don't turn moralist. I am sick of sermons. Sir Henry preaches eternally. But tell me, what have you done that is so naughty? Do tell me—I like wicked things—they are so racy.'

'Pollute your fresh young mind with the detail of my past iniquities! No, no; even I have not yet sunk to that level. You know what the world would say, Miss Trant—that walking in this wood alone with me is not a fit place for you.'

Georgie looked at him with a heightened colour and flashing eyes.

'You are bitter to-day,' she said. 'How often have I told you that what the world says is a matter of perfect indifference to me! I am as fearless and as safe here alone with you as I should be on that croquet-lawn with all those dolts; besides, you amuse me—they do not. Oh! you cannot think how bored I have been down here, or you would tell me some of your raciest little episodes. Have you played much lately—won any money?'

'No, lost,' he said, and there was despair in the tone. 'I am the most unfortunate devil upon the earth.'

'That is bad,' said Georgie, and her face assumed a graver expression than was her wont; 'but, after all, playing is a very precarious mode of living. If I were you, I would try something more solid.'

He laughed, a little hollow laugh.

'Georgie,' he said,—and he grasped her hand with a nervous twitch, which almost hurt her—'Georgie, you know nothing of my antecedents, or you would not talk in that quiet tone. You don't know that at nineteen I bolted from my father's house, afraid of encountering his anger over my debts. I had but a few shillings in my pocket; with these I managed to get to a seaport town, from whence I worked my way as a common seaman to the United States. There—but I will not tell you all the vicissitudes of fortune through which I passed; suffice it to say that sometimes for days I had scarcely bread to eat, or at night a hole in which to sleep; then for weeks perhaps the ill-luck would change, and I revelled for awhile in almost regal splendour; but it was a hard life and a hardening one. Now that

I have got back here, among the haunts of fashion, I wish myself out of them with all my heart. I have still to fight and struggle on, with a past history to drag me back; and if I don't manage to keep afloat, I am sure none of the dandies one has to make one's daily companions would hold out a straw to save me from drowning.'

'Oh! Mr. Clive, do let me help you! I am sure I could do something, if you would let me try.' And the tears were in the hazel eyes.

'Help me, dear Georgie,' he said softly—'no, you cannot help me; and I may crush you. I would to God we had never met!'

'Oh! dear, how odd and uncomfortable you are! Do let us be bright and cheery. Have you forgotten our philosophical arrangement—always to take things as they come?'

'Why did we get on the subject of the past?' he said. 'With me it is always a painful one. But, by Jove! when I think of the future, that is nearly as bad!'

'You are a nice sort of companion to fall in with after all, when one is down at zero among these "bucolics." I have not much opinion of you, Mr. Clive, if losses at play can make you so gloomy.'

'You have not played at ball with luck, as I have, or you too would be influenced by its ups and downs.'

'No, I should not. Nothing would give me a fit of the blues but disagreeable, formal people, and to be told every hour that I am leading a useless life, because I don't teach dirty children, or regulate my mind by the standard of books.'

'Is that your friend Sir Henry Wilbraham's view of life? When you are Lady Wilbraham, will it occasionally be allowed to a poor vagrant like me to come and pour the history of my troubles into your ear?'

'When I am Lady Wilbraham!' And she laughed merrily. 'I am a long way off that high honour as yet. The bird has to be caught, and then tamed—not so easy when it is pining for freedom.'

'I heard a report in town that this party was given in honour of your engagement.'

'Very kind indeed of people to say so; and of course one never knows what may happen next; but at present no such thing exists.'

For a moment the moody look cleared off Mr. Clive's brow, then it gathered again more darkly than before.

'I am almost sorry,' he said in a low voice; 'I had hoped you would be safe in a home of plenty and peace.'

'Thank you, sir.' And she snatched her hand from his arm. 'I suppose I can be safe without being beholden to Sir Henry Wilbraham? You talk in strange enigmas to-day. It is my belief you have suddenly gone mad. Let us go on the lawn. I am beginning to think it not safe to walk in this wood with you alone.'

'Oh! Miss Trant, forgive me. If you knew what I have suffered, you would have patience with me.'

'You are so very reticent about the cause of your sufferings, that I don't see how you can expect me to take an interest in them. Let us talk on general subjects. I am tired of this sort of vague sentimentality.'

Mr. Clive made no answer; and they pursued their course towards the house for some minutes in silence, but a quietude of long duration was not to Georgie's taste.

'What fun it would be to introduce you to the "bucolics" as my dumb friend from London. I am sure you would have no difficulty in playing the part.'

'As long as I am not expected to be deaf as well, I should not care. It seems I cannot say the right thing to-day; and I should at least have the gratification of hearing you talk.'

'Oh! now you are breaking out in compliments, you will do. I believe it was the gloomy aspect of that wood that weighed on your spirits. Acknowledge that the country is very dispiriting. Oh! how I hate it! Don't you?'

'All but its flowers,' answered her companion. 'I must own to a weakness for those gorgeous little beauties of nature.' And he stooped as he spoke, and gathered a sweet-smelling, lovely rose, then he turned and commenced arranging it himself in the folds of Georgie's blue dress.

Perfectly unresisting the while, she let him do as he liked, though the colour mantled in her cheek.

'An emblem of peace,' she said. 'Well, we won't quarrel any more to-day; but let us go and make ourselves agreeable for a little while. I have a certain amount of conscience, though you may doubt it; and as Sir Henry gave

this party for my especial delectation, it looks rather bearish to cut it altogether.'

'Then there was some truth in the report I heard.'

'Just the glimmer that reports always have. I was bored, asked for an excitement, and behold it !' and they stood for a few moments at the end of a path which led from the little wood round through the flower-garden on to the lawn.

'I am not going to be introduced to your sister,' said Georgie suddenly, after a short pause. 'I hate the female relations of my masculine friends, they always pick one to pieces and make rude remarks.'

'As you like,' answered Mr. Clive, laughing ; 'she is a very quiet clergyman's wife, and I daresay you would astonish her somewhat.'

'Most probably, so we will not try it,' was the cool reply ; 'but you had better look after her a little, for I must go and pour oil on troubled streams. I see all the Wilbraham faction is in arms, and even mama looks rather tempest-driven. Oh, don't put on that martyr's expression ; these festivities are to end with a dance, when all this twaddling croquet-playing is over.' And with a little nod to Clive, and a bright look in her beaming eyes, she dashed off and wended her way up to the refreshment-tent, in the shade of which Lady Ida was sitting. She threw herself on the grass at her mother's feet, and tossing her tiny bonnet on the ground beside her, shook back her luxuriantly curling hair.

'Dear me, it is very warm ! How can those people stand in the sun and knock those senseless balls about ?'

'Hush, Georgie ! Where have you been ? Do put your bonnet on, you will be thought mad.'

'I have been walking in the wood with Mr. Clive. Only fancy his being here ! Isn't it jolly, mama ?'

'My dear Georgie, you should not go away in that fashion. It is not *ton*, indeed it is not. I wish Aunt Sophy were here to look after you. When will you learn to be more circumspect and regardful of public observation ?'

'The old bugbear, Mother Grundy ! I wonder whether that antique party will ever die ? Here comes Sir Henry ! Now for his strictures on the propriety of the British Maiden.'

'Miss Trant, you have not even played one game of croquet to-day. I think, too, you promised me to be my partner in a match.'

‘Oh, you will let me off, like a dear good-natured creature that you are ! It is so hot, and I am reserving all my energies for the ball to-night.’

‘The second time to-day that I have been thrown over,’ he said in a low voice.

‘You shall have a dance to-night—I swear it—will that please you?—only do let me have a little peace and quietness now, here at the feet of my most erudite parent. Mr. Clive, if you do not share my dislike to know the relations of your friends, allow me to introduce you to my mother.’

Sir Henry turned round with a start, and found himself face to face with this not very welcome guest. Georgie rather enjoyed his start and look of annoyance, so she said,

‘Ah, you are as much astonished as I was to see Mr. Clive. Wasn’t it good for him to think we should all be so glad to see him to-day.’

‘Very good indeed,’ answered Sir Henry coldly, as he shook hands with his guest.

‘Like his impudence, to come here without an invitation,’ was his mental remark. ‘By Jove ! I’ll write to Earlsfort to-morrow, and beg him to find out all about this fellow.’ And then Sir Henry walked away and left the field to his rival. And sitting on the grass near Lady Ida’s chair, regardless that a morrow would ever dawn, did Georgie and Clive pass the rest of that sunny afternoon in idle talk and airy badinage.





CHAPTER VI.

‘L’ART DE PLAIRE EST L’ART DE TROMPER.’

ONCE again let us take a peep into the pretty little drawing-room in the Twickenham Villa. Mathilde d’Aubigné is seated as of yore, gazing out on that ever-flowing water ; but this time she wears a dress of sober hue, and her luxuriant auburn hair is rolled in simple braids close to her well-shaped head. She has done all that feminine art can do to make herself look meek and quiet ; but the large, wild eyes, and the full, expressive mouth belie all efforts to represent humbleness and patience.

Certainly neither of these virtues is at the present moment at all strongly portrayed. She sits rocking herself in a lounging-chair, and wriggling her foot backwards and forwards over a crushed letter, which she has just rolled up in a ball and thrown angrily on the floor, while the inward surgings of fierce passion gleam from her eyes, and her ‘shaggy brows wave dark above her gathered rage.’

She rings the bell violently, and the summons is speedily answered by old Jerome. The faithful servant looks somewhat appalled at the unusually excited state of his mistress.

‘*Madame n’est pas malade ?*’ he asks anxiously.

‘No, no, I am well enough, but very much disturbed and worried. This is a letter from France.’ And with her dainty foot she kicked the crushed missive across the room. ‘My last hopes of fortune in that quarter are gone. The few brains M. d’Aubigné ever possessed he has managed to get rid of, and has been immured in a *maison de santé* for the rest of his days.’

‘What happiness ! Then Madame will be quit of his importunities.’

‘You may see the benefit ; for my part, I do not,’ was

the tart answer. 'His estate cannot be touched, or will not be touched, which comes to the same thing, as long as he lives ; and in the meantime I may starve, for anything those merciless d'Aubignés care.'

The old man's countenance fell.

'*Est-ce bien vrai ?*' at last he asked, with a crafty look in his cold eye.

'True enough, I should think,' she answered lightly. 'But you can go over to France and find out, if you like ; as for me, I don't intend to go near any of them.'

'But what does Madame mean to do ?' he asked respectfully.

'Make the best bargain I can with Fortune. I have a few hundreds, which will last me for a time, and it is to be hoped something will turn up.'

'But Madame had a *dot* left her by *Monsieur son Père le Général ?*'

'A miserable thousand francs a year. If my father had left me a *dot* worth having, you don't think I should have married that imbecile d'Aubigné !'

'*Mais que c'est terrible !*' exclaimed the old soldier. '*Mon Dieu ! je n'ose pas y penser !*' And the tears started in his eyes.

'*Allons, mon vieux*, don't lose heart,' and she held out her hand to her faithful follower. 'You and I have only each other in the world ; we have seen a good many changes together since the old days when you used to prop me up on your shoulder as the Gardes marched down the boulevards. We shall weather this storm too, never fear—though I am afraid we shall have to part for a time.'

The old man fairly broke into sobs.

'*Non, non, M^{lle} Mathilde ; je ne vous quitterai pas, jamais de ma vie. Ah, que c'est mauvais de vouloir éloigner le vieux serviteur.*'

'My dear, good Jerome, this is absurd ! We cannot starve, either of us. I, at any rate, do not intend to ; and if we stay here and look at each other, there is no alternative.'

'Starve, no !—I can help you to live.'

'Madame la Comtesse and her valet-de-chambre ! Pah ! people would not employ me. Nonsense, my dear Jerome, that would never do ! Proud poverty is not the little game I mean to play ; I have had enough of it lately.'

I mean to try quite a different line ; and I tell you we *must* part—I don't say immediately, or for ever ; whenever I have a home of my own again you shall come back. In the meantime, if you like, you can go to Lyons, and look up the d'Aubignés' affairs. If you make anything of them, so much the better ; but don't say I sent you over there. I have done with them for ever. By-the-way, when you have traced M. d'Aubigné to his *maison de santé*, it would perhaps be as well to have some one in your pay to let us know when he dies there. It would be pleasant to be informed when one is free.'

The old servant looked more radiant—here was work to be done in his young mistress' cause, and he doubted not but he would make something out of these affairs at Lyons. Still he returned to his old plaint.

'*Mais vous laisser seule !*'

'Well, you shall see me in a safe place before you go. I tell you I have a few hundreds left ; and there is no immediate necessity for a change. Will that satisfy you?'

'*Si Madame veut.*' And he bent in respectful obeisance, ere he turned with a woe-begone air to leave the room.

Madame d'Aubigné rose, smoothed out the letter, and put it carefully away in her writing case. She too, with old Jerome, had some doubts about that *maison de santé* story.

Then she turned her letters and papers over, as though in search of some missing document. At last she found that for which she was looking.

'Mrs. Baird, Grafton Street, Pimlico,' she read aloud. 'I wonder what the good lady is like, and whether she will prove useful? Let me see—a quiet bonnet, &c. Always in doubtful cases assume a modest exterior—much more likely to pay. That was a saying of poor mama's.'

So she dressed herself with quiet exactness, and proceeded to pay a visit to the as yet unknown Mrs. Baird. When she arrived in the dingy street, and saw the rigid, comfortless aspect of the house, she acknowledged to herself the truth of her mother's maxim.

A red-haired, slatternly girl replied to Mathilde's knock, and on being asked if her mistress was at home, said that she was, but that she was 'mighty tuk' up wi' larning,' and had no time to waste on strangers.

Mathilde smiled, as she thought that she did not diffuse

it, at all events, and giving a note to the little savage, she desired her to take it to her mistress, and say that the bearer waited for an answer. After a delay of two or three minutes, the gaunt figure of Mrs. Baird herself appeared at the back parlour door, and, extending a hand to her visitor, she begged her to come in.

Mathilde glanced round the cold, bare-looking room with a sort of shudder ; then with calm scrutiny she surveyed its occupant, as she stood in the window reading her letter.

‘An eccentricity!’ was the mental remark. ‘She must be humoured. I wish I had asked Ralph more particulars about her. I should like to know in what line her literary tastes develop themselves.’

She had no time for further cogitation ; for Mrs. Baird, having finished the perusal of her letter, turned round and addressed her—

‘*Madame, avec grand plaisir je vous vois.*’

Mathilde, accomplished actress though she was, nearly forgot her part, and began to laugh as these words were slowly enunciated, in the most unmistakable of English accents ; however, she bowed her head demurely, and answered in soft, musical English, which a slightly foreign tinge made still more charming.

‘I should have called to see you before, but I have been in great trouble. I am half-English—my mother, at least, was English. Shall we not converse in the language of your country?’

‘With pleasure,’ replied Mrs. Baird, very much relieved. ‘I regret to say I do not speak French with fluency. One has so little opportunity of conversing in England.’

‘I shall be delighted if I can in any way conduce to your improvement. We might have some charming little conversations together ; though I feel I shall be considerably the gainer, for knowledge of your wonderful learning is not foreign to me.’

Mrs. Baird beamed all over with pleasure. Here was a sensible woman, who would yield her her proper place in the literary world.

‘Exactly what I should like,’ she said ; ‘I live but to be instructed and to instruct ; but, in the meantime, tell me about my nephew Ralph. What is he doing in Germany? I thought he was safe in the States. I am so much taken

up with my literary pursuits that I have rarely time to write to my family.'

'Your nephew, Mr. Baird, is a gentle, tractable youth, worthy to win the deepest regard,' said Mathilde, always assuming the same meek manner. 'I saw a good deal of him in Germany, and was very much taken with him.'

'He is the son of my late husband's brother,' explained Mrs. Baird, 'and will come into a good bit of money some day.'

'So I should imagine, from his *entourage* and his expenditure.'

'One thing in his letter surprises me much,' said his aunt, as she turned it over to re-peruse it. 'Who is this Clive he speaks of? How is my nephew mixed up with him?'

'Mr. Clive is his tutor, I believe,' said Mathilde, quietly, having first eyed the old lady carefully, as though she would fain find out what she knew about Clive.

'Did you know him, madame?'

'Mr. Clive? I have seen him occasionally, when in the society of your nephew.'

'And did you think him a desirable person for my nephew's tutor?'

'Well, he was scarcely his tutor, you know—more a friend to advise him. Young men get into such trouble on the Continent, unless they have some one to guide them.'

'Humph! Mr. Clive is in London; where is Ralph?' and Mathilde had much difficulty in looking calm and unmoved under Mrs. Baird's inquisitorial gaze.

'He was in Germany when I left, but if Mr. Clive be in London, Ralph Baird may be here too,' she said. 'You will see by the date of that letter I did not perform my promise of calling on his aunt as speedily as I should have liked; but, as I told you, I have been in great trouble. My poor husband, I regret to say, has softening of the brain. He has had the disorder for some time, but lately the doctors have been compelled to have him placed under restraint,' and she held her hand to her brow and sighed heavily, as though the thought of it oppressed her.

'Poor thing! what a sad trial! Is he in England?'

'No, madame, at Lyons, his birthplace; but his family don't care for me, so I left. I felt, too, that my nerves required a thorough change of scene.'

‘Have you friends in England?’

‘But few.’

‘Well, I hope you will make yourself at home here,’ and the American stretched out her bony hand and shook Mathilde’s little fingers till she nearly crushed them. ‘You are residing at Twickenham, I think?’

‘For the present, yes, but I know not how long I shall remain there. Owing to my husband’s health, my affairs are necessarily very unsettled.’

‘Money, money!’ groaned Mrs. Baird. ‘I suppose it is a necessary evil, but it is indeed a serious one. Our great Lord Bacon calls “riches the baggage of virtue. For as the baggage is to an army, so are riches to virtue. It cannot be spared or left behind, but it hindereth the march; yea, and the care of it sometimes loseth and disturbeth the victory.”’

‘Philosophical quotations—that is the line, is it?’ thought Mathilde. ‘Rather a bore. I am afraid Alfred de Musset and Paul de Kock will not suit. However, she answered quietly,—‘Riches are not likely to impede my social progress, unless it be the want of them.’

‘Work, my dear lady, work,’ and Mrs. Baird drew her chair close to her visitor. ‘Working women—women who can show, by their great literary attainments, that they have minds above the common herd, are much wanted to demonstrate how possible it would be to educate the masses of feminine noodles with which the world abounds. The desire I have to see women educated almost amounts to a mania.’

Mathilde smiled, and thought the old lady a bore; but at the same time she told her that she perfectly agreed with her,—the education of women was very much neglected—and that she herself had the fullest intention of devoting herself to some great undertaking. Then she tried to get Mrs. Baird back to the subject of Clive. She did not feel very sure of her ground, and she wanted to find out what this old self-constituted *savante* could know of that dashing, careless, somewhat illiterate Clive; but she could elicit no information. The little leads, which were all she dared to give, were totally disregarded. Mrs. Baird’s bicycle was education, and when once it was set a-going, it took a good range before it came to a full stop.

At last Madame d’Aubigné, finding there was nothing

more to be heard of the subject which interested her, rose to depart. She had a long way to go ere she reached her home, she said, but she promised to return soon, and listen to another learned dissertation. She took her leave, more amused than impressed by her morning's work.

'And so that little nonentity, Ralph Baird, owns to that would-be clever aunt. What a fool the woman is, to be sure! However, she is some one respectable to fall back on, and will be very easily humbugged, with all her supposed cleverness, I should think.'

And the cloud of the morning had quite cleared from Mathilde's brow. To the wily, smart young Frenchwoman there was something so irresistibly ludicrous in the interview she had just passed through, that she could scarcely control her amusement as she walked rapidly through the streets.

Once arrived in her own pretty room, she threw her prim-looking bonnet on one side, and regaled herself with a right-down hearty laugh. Then she looked round on those little bits of bric-à-brac beauty which are so necessary to the happiness of some women's daily lives—women who, like Mathilde, delight in a perfumed atmosphere, pretty things, sweet flowers, gay-looking books, bright furniture with its redundancy of white and gold—in fact, every little gewgaw that wealth alone can give. She took all this abundance of social beauty which surrounded her in at a glance, and laughed again.

'The baggage of virtue!' she exclaimed, as she looked on it. 'Well, virtue or not, it is a sort of baggage I mean to keep, unless the Parcæ are very adverse. *Mon Dieu!* *cette femme*, she has almost been too much for me. Dinner ready? Well, Jerome, bring me some Champagne. I have done with a sister-of-mercy life—it does not prove successful. I am going to live again.'

'*Bon!* that is as it should be, madame.'

She drank her champagne and ate her dinner, while the old servant busied himself about the room.

'Tell me,' she said at last, 'have you been into town lately? Where is Mr. Clive? I want to see him.'

'M. Clive is in the country, Madame.'

'Oswald Clive in the country! What is he doing? Bah! Jerome, you are joking!'

'It is, *cependant*, quite true.'

‘Well, where has he gone, and what for? Since you seem to know so much about him, tell me quickly.’

‘To a great fête given to-day, at which he hopes to meet a pretty *mignonne* of his acquaintance. *Il aime bien les dames, ce M. Clive.*’

‘He would be a great fool if he did not,’ she answered gaily; but there was the visible shadow of an inward annoyance on her brow. ‘Georgie, I suppose,’ she said, meditatively. ‘Hasn’t that folly died out yet?’

The old man smiled.

‘Madame encourages it herself.’

She drew herself up with mock decorum.

‘Well, Jerome, as M. d’Aubigné’s wife, it was not correct for me to have Mr. Clive as a perpetual attaché; but now that that dear husband of mine has taken himself to a *maison de santé*, I mean to amuse myself. But Clive has become rather dull lately. I want to see him, though—on business; so find him out, and when he returns let me know. By-the-way, have you heard anything of late about that young American idiot, Ralph Baird?’

‘Non, Madame—not since we came here,’ and the old man’s ugly, weather-beaten countenance beamed all over, as though the mention of Ralph Baird’s name brought back some recollection not unfraught with amusement. ‘Pardon, Madame, that I laugh, but M. Bade at Spa—oh! *je n’oublierai jamais!*’

‘Not the least clever thing we ever did, eh, Jerome?’

‘*Sapristi! non, Madame*; it was worthy the tactics of the *digne fille* of *Monsieur votre Père le Général*.’

‘Well, never mind my father; let his manes rest in the shades below. I don’t think either that he was much given to plotting. Fancy, Jerome—I have been to see that young Baird’s aunt to-day.’

Ah, vraiment, Madame has also the courage of *Monsieur son Père le Général*.’

‘Not at all; she is an old imbecile, who thinks herself clever. She knows nothing of worldly affairs, and will do for a victim—though not, perhaps, in the same way as her nephew. She is not likely to learn anything about me, and I may get a good deal of information out of her. The extraordinary thing is, she seems to know something of Mr. Clive.

‘Oh! Madame, beware of quicksands!’

‘There is no danger. I know what I am about, *mon brave*.’

‘Well, Madame, I am always to command ; whenever there is a little *espionnage* to be done, let me know. But, *chère Madame*, don’t send me from you, I beg—I implore !’

‘Well, we shall see. I have as yet but a very indefinite idea about my future plans. Several courses have presented themselves to my mind. I scarcely know as yet which to adopt ; but of one thing I am quite resolved—*coûte que coûte*. I will be rich and independent, too, if it be possible ; at any rate, we shall not part for long, ycu dear, silly old *bête*—you are too necessary to me ; but you must go to France and look after my wifely rights.’





CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD MAN'S TALE.

DAILYNTON Dillon is in his studio, working away at the mixture of some colours for a great picture, by which he hopes to attain that long-craved-for fame which he dreams of every time he places a new picture on his easel. There is a good deal of perseverance and freshness about 'old Dillon,' as he is irreverently called by his friends. He toils steadily on, with honest purpose, never fretting over his failures, but rejoicing exceedingly when Dame Fortune chooses to smile on him; and with true Bohemian generosity, he always shares the little gifts which the fickle lady occasionally bestows on him, with those who have not so lately seen the bright sunshine of her presence. This morning Dillon is in the happiest of moods; he has just got a good sum for a bad picture, and he whistles away with light-hearted gaiety as he prepares for the next venture. He is a good-looking, genial old fellow, though many years have come and gone since his boyhood; and as he stands there in a loose old dressing-gown well begrimed by age and dirt, the full light pouring on his manly head, with its long, grizzly beard, it seems almost as if he himself had stepped out of some quaint old Vandyck gem. The room he is at work in is very tiny, and is at the top of a small house in a dirty, out-of-the-way street. So high up is it, that the only view to be seen from the windows is that of a vast area of chimneys, with their streams of smoke curling up skyward, and murking over the bright blue empyrean vault. Out of this wretched attic, which Mr. Dillon dignifies with the name of *atelier*, there opens another one, much smaller; but so ill-constructed and high up is the tiny hole intended to admit air and light, that not even the smoke is discernible, and in this badly-venti-

lated cupboard does the painter sleep. Yet the good man is perfectly contented. 'His wants are few, his pleasures many,' he is wont to say.

Such are the haunts in which real work is done, and though many, and perhaps with less resignation than poor old Dillon, are doomed, like him, either from want of genius, or interest, to linger out a lifetime without achieving any great success, yet some of the noblest masterpieces of art have emanated from more miserable dens than even this one. How comparatively rare it is that genius has its birth-place in a home of luxury and ease !

The mind shall banquet though the body pine ;
Fat paunches have lean pates, and dainty bits
Make rich the ribs, but bank'rout quite the wits.

How far more frequently does it struggle into light, with difficulty seeking to extricate itself from an uncongenial companionship. Like poor Tor, who discoursed on chivalry, amid a herd of cows, and so perplexed and plagued his father with his shooting, his darts, and his battles, that in his trouble he went to King Arthur, who knighted the youth, for the very genius for arms and knightly exercises which he saw in him. But '*revenons à nos moutons.*'

Old Dillon stopped his whistling, and took a long draught from an honest-looking pewter pot which stood on a somewhat ricketty table near him ; then, like a giant refreshed with wine, he went on briskly as before, now singing snatches of some cheery song, now whistling like a very bullfinch. Presently he is brought to a sudden stop by a loud knock at the door.

'Come in, whoever you are,' is the ready answer ; and in another second a little wizen man, very seedily, even dirtily dressed, entered and stood before him.

'By Jove, Sternheim, where have you come from ? I am glad to see you,' and the palette and the colours were thrown hastily on one side, and the new-comer was warmly shaken by both hands.

A grim smile passed over the weather-beaten, deeply-lined face, as he answered, in very broken English—

'Gut, gut, that you should take me in your arm. You are not rich neither—I see it from your home—but big-hearted as ever.'

‘Always glad to see an old friend like yourself. It is—how many?—five, six years since we parted; by gad, the sight of you makes me feel quite young again! Now, tell me, how is it you have come to London?’

‘Nein, nein, not now—that must be for tabak talk; it is not a gay story. I have travel a long way up and down in life since we parted. Tell me of yourself,’ and he looked round the room—‘too many pictures begun and not finish. Mein Freund, why all this waste of canvas?’

‘This morning above all others I am not going to be lectured. I have just got a good cheque; and, by the way, come along and celebrate the event by breakfasting with me at the “Windmill” round the corner; there is no accommodation for conviviality here, and we will drink to each other’s health in a pewter of such jolly home-brewed as your German cellars can never boast.’

The visitor’s eyes twinkled as Dillon spoke, and he licked his lips in anticipation. There was a hungry expression about him, as if he had been wandering about the world all his life with a muzzle on, only looking at the good things he could not get at. And so, in fact, it was—poverty had been his muzzle, and the anticipation of Dillon’s good cheer was a welcome one.

‘Come along,’ said the painter, as he began to divest himself of his flowing garments for some more civilised-looking clothes.

They proceeded together down the dirty, comfortless wooden staircase, and picking their way with difficulty through the groups of children who were some crying, some laughing over their play, at intervals in their line of descent, they arrived at last in the street.

‘Always Kinder, wherever one goes. What for is the world so thickly peopled, I wonder?’

‘Poor little things, I rather like to see and hear them. There is a blue-eyed fairy in our house who often pays me a visit. I mean her to sit for my next picture.’

‘Das ist gut. A cheap model. Some bon-bons and a smile.’

‘Such is life!’ laughed Dillon; ‘a dinner and a little flattery often wins a man. But here we are, and I am quite voracious. Strange, I am never hungry when my pockets are empty. Then, I always think a bit of bread and cheese a dinner for an emperor.’

‘Ah, everyone is not endowed with your blessed spirit of content.’

Dillon at once ordered a substantial meal ; and in a few minutes they fell to vigorously with their knives and forks, as men do who by hard work have gained an appetite. For some time no conversation was carried on, except in short sentences ; but all of a sudden Dillon exclaimed,—

‘By Jove, Sternheim, who do you think is in London, swelling it with the best? Why, Clive—you must recollect him, man?’

The old German dropped his knife and fork, and screwing up his small sharp eyes, looked at his friend for a second without speaking.

‘Gott in Himmel! you ask me if I remember me of him—that is too good!’

‘I did not know he had made such a lasting impression on you.’

‘Wahr, you did not know our relation—you were return to your own land.’

‘Your relations with Clive! No, I only knew he was a merry devil, who was an acquisition rather than otherwise at those rowdy gatherings we used to have in the old days—though, be it said, he was unscrupulous enough in his ways and means. What happened after I left—eh? He seems to have lined his pockets somehow—a sharpish sort of chap!’

‘Where is Ralph Baird, do you know?’ asked the German eagerly, instead of answering Dillon’s question.

‘Who the devil is Ralph Baird?’

‘Ah, you can tell nothing. Have you seen this Clive?—where is he living? what is he doing? Gott be thanked! he is in London. I shall find him out; I shall wander no farther through the earth to seek him.’

‘Who will you find—Clive or Baird? My dear Sternheim, you are frightfully incoherent! Pray explain what all this means. Have you come all the way from New York, where I thought you were comfortably settled for the rest of your life, to hunt about the world after a scamp like Clive? What has he done to work you up to this fever?’

‘Clive sei verdammt! Let me but find the boy! Oh Gott, that I should live to know him lost!’

‘My dear good friend, what do you mean? I cannot believe my senses. Why, we used to call you the phlegmatic

Sternheim, and quote you as an example of philosophic coolness ; and to see you so excited and wild, is indeed strange. Come, old man, make a friend of me ; whatever has happened, I will back you up.'

'You are gut—very gut !' and he pressed Dillon's hand with much warmth. 'Her boy, her boy!' he muttered ; 'und ich bin schuldig, I am to blame. Gott ! Gott ! but you will help me, mein Freund !'

'With all my heart,' was the ready answer ; but Dillon shrugged his shoulders, as though he thought a lunatic asylum were the abode to which it would be wisest to help his friend.

'Then hear my tale ; I will be calm and tell you in a few words. Before I knew you, mein guter Dillon, many years ago, when I first left my Vaterland, to work my way and seek expansion of great ideas among the progressive movements of the new country, I was not the shrivelled mummy care and want have since caused me to become. I had, like others, that external and internal freshness which is the heritage of the young. Poverty has made me ugly to behold, and I thought philosophy had calmed the inward fire ; but no, it had only slept, for a great emotion to awaken it. Well, it is true of me as of others—I loved and was beloved. The maiden, too, was beautiful, but she was like her sex. I have studied them since, and know now it is a fault born with them ; they cannot help it, poor things ! She was not true. She left me to my work and my poverty, and married another who had more gold than I had. I cursed her for a time ; then I became engrossed in my literature, my philosophy, and I tried to forget her, but it was not to be. She was ever about me, in the street, at the theatre—everywhere I saw her, and such a weary, sorry look in her dark eyes ; there was no *Glück* in that young life. Her husband was a brute ; her punishment had come from him. Why should I not be satisfied ?—she had missed her happiness when she blighted mine. I could afford to pity, no longer need I curse.'

'You mean you loved her still, my good old Sternheim ? Well, go on.'

'So you think. Well, perhaps you are right—at any rate, we become friends—I go to the house. The husband, a long-headed American, with many of the broad, large views peculiar to his nationality, takes pleasure sometimes in

rubbing them against my quaint, metaphysical Germanisms, so we are well bekannt—Freund no, never with that man ; but I can smooth her life, and allay sometimes the little storms. He, that big man of money, never suspect that any love could grow between his fair young wife and a dried German philosopher like me. As the years went on, she had children, but one above all was her favourite—a dark-eyed boy—a perfect Adonis—he was his mother's picture—I loved him for her sake. Many times when you were in the States, I had it on my tongue to ask you to take that boy's portrait, but I could not bring my mind to speak of them, nor mix up my Mary and her boy in our man's talk.'

The tears were in honest Dillon's eyes as he listened to this recital. How near he had lived to this man, and how little had he known of the inward workings of what seemed to be a cold, phlegmatic nature. Who would have guessed that this little wizen, needy German's life had been a poem?

'I wish you had—I wish you had. Had you but trusted me, I would have proved honest.'

'I know it, mein Freund, or I would not confide the story to you now. Well, things went on their way quietly till some twelve months ago, when it was mooted that the boy, the handsome Ralph, must travel in other countries—see Europe and the world ; but not alone. I am asked my opinion, and in a moment of aberration I suggest Clive for his companion.'

'Good heavens !' said Dillon. 'What were you thinking of ?'

'I did not know—I did not know. He was a gentleman, always bewailing his want of money. I believed, too, he had good friends in his own country, and I thought to do him a kindness.'

'And he led the boy to the gaming-tables. A love of play was ever Clive's curse ; and not very honest play either.'

Sternheim groaned.

'I knew it not,' he said. 'I was myself no gamester, and did not think of it in him. When it was too late, I knew it all.'

He stopped, and covered his face with his hands.

'And the poor boy,' asked Dillon—was he his victim or his tool ?'

'Worse—far worse than either has happened to that poor

child,' replied the old German, struggling with his sobs—'he has disappeared altogether!'

'Disappeared altogether!—impossible, my dear Sternheim. In this nineteenth century, people don't disappear and leave no trace behind them, unless—good heavens! you don't mean he has been murdered?'

Sternheim looked at him, and there was such a storm of agony in the old man's face that Dillon, strong man though he was, fairly quailed before it.

'I cannot believe it,' he continued, hesitatingly. 'Clive is, as we know, a dare-devil vagabond, but surely he is not a murderer. Go on—tell me the whole story.'

Struggling with emotion, Sternheim proceeded with his tale.

'They left New York together with money—much money at their command, and credit for a still farther amount; for Mr. Baird is wealthy, and no miser. For some two or three months all seemed to go well. Good tidings came from the boy, and an occasional letter from Clive. They both seemed to be leading happy lives—now at one great capital, now at another. At last all communication ceased. In vain were letters addressed to them, *Poste Restante*, at the towns they had the intention to visit. No answer came. Weeks grew into months, and nothing was heard. The poor mother was paler and quieter every day; the long silence of her darling was wearing the *schein* out of her life. I, too, was distracted. I felt I was the cause of her grief, and I could not bear to see it. I made every enquiry, and then learnt too late the story of gambling transactions, and many shady affairs of which this Clive was guilty. Gott in Himmel knows what I have felt! Poor Ralph!—to think that I, who loved him so, should have helped him on to his damnation! Well, I could bear myself no longer, so I resolved to start off, and wander about the earth till I should find some trace of the boy. I told no one of my intention. I thought the father might offer me money. I would not touch his gold. Bitter, bitter is my lot in life! Oh! how shall I ever look poor Mary in the face again? You tell me Clive is in London; but where—where is the boy?' And the old man grew almost hysterical in his excitement. Dillon laid his hand on his shoulder.

'My good friend, don't give way like this. Do let us be

a little bit practical. Clive is in London, paying his addresses to a young lady of some rank, therefore very easily got at. It seems to me he has never been asked about this missing boy. Let us seek him out. I have no doubt he will be able to give a satisfactory account. Perhaps this Ralph, as you call him, may be with him; it is probable, though I have not heard of him.'

'Do you think so?—do you think so, mein Freund?' and the old German's countenance became for a moment radiant! Then it changed again. 'Nein, nein! it cannot be. I know it well there has been false work! if Ralph were here with that verdammter Clive, he would write to the mother of his love.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Dillon, as though a new light had struck him. 'Did you say the name was Baird? Why, I am well acquainted with a good lady of that name, who was once a citizen of New York. I wonder if she is any relation.'

'So—so that is it?' answered the German, so excited that he could scarcely get the words out. 'For her I come to England. She may perhaps know of him. Ah, you know her—that is gut, gut. She is his aunt. Ah me! shall we go make her a visit together?'

'She is a rare card to play,' said Dillon. 'If she has a learned treatise in her head, all the Ralphs in the world will not make her leave off till she has finished it. Yes, we will go and see her. How strange she should be aunt to the missing boy! She has not much money, I should imagine. Why, she lives in a poky, dirty little house, with an unpleasant-looking girl for a "help," as the Yankees say.'

'Perhaps not; but the boy Ralph—his father has great riches—but what care I to talk of their gold, while the fate of the boy is still in doubt? You do not seem impressed with the importance of an instant search. Ah! you, too, are false; you will not be mein Freund.'

'My dear Sternheim, you may rely on my giving you every assistance, but I have knocked about the world a good deal, and you will forgive me for saying that to a plain, straightforward man there seems a good deal of moonshine in the story. What object could Clive have in putting this boy out of the way? I should have imagined he would have stuck to him for bleeding purposes as long as possible.'

'Of his motive I know not, care not. Where is the boy?—what for he pass away, and be heard of no more?'

‘Courage, my dear fellow! I am sure it is all right! you have allowed your imagination to run riot till your brain is on fire. You shall come back with me, freshen up your general appearance a little, and then we will wander out to Pimlico, and hear what Mrs. Baird says about the matter. Perhaps, too, in the course of the day, we might even manage to see Clive himself; he is in London, or rather was, three weeks or a month ago.’

‘Three weeks ago!—mein Gott! he may be in Siberia by this time!’

‘Well, I believe it is just upon three weeks since I heard of him. I have been so busy lately, I have not had time to visit my usual haunts; but about three weeks ago I heard him spoken of as playing pretty high at one of the clubs. I wonder where the devil he gets his money from? But come along, my friend; I see you are all impatience to be in action. As we go along, you shall tell me what this missing boy is like. Strange, that, if he be in London, I have not seen him at his aunt’s. She knows something of Clive, too, I fancy.’

So the two men left the ‘Windmill’ arm-in-arm, the German looking, if anything, older and more bent by care than when they entered. The recital of that heart-history had tried him much; he was not wont to be expansive, and for the first time had the confession of his life’s secret passed his lips. Dillon’s cheery view of things, too, did not please him; he could not see them from his aspect, nor allow his mind for a moment to dwell on anything but a tragical end. However, from former experience he knew Dillon to be ready and honest, therefore he felt that, unnerved and distracted as he was by his own bewildering thoughts, he could not be in better hands. And the sequel proved his wisdom.





CHAPTER VIII.

TWO STRINGS TO HER BOW.

THE fête at Sir Henry Wilbraham's is over. The dancing was kept up with great spirit till a late hour, and a bit of dissipation, so unusual in that quiet country neighbourhood, has provided the gossips with a fund of talk for some few weeks to come.

Pretty Georgie is lying on her sofa about one o'clock on the day following the festivities. She says she is too weary, from her exertions on the previous evening, to be a fit companion for any one, so she declined to join the party in the breakfast-room. The truth is that, girl-like, she is dreaming over her past successes, and does not wish the train of her ideas to be broken by a rude jostle against matter-of-fact conversation. Georgie, though, as we know, is not given to much reflection ; she prefers to hear the prattle of her own little glib tongue, so she has sent for Glory to bear her company for awhile. The young girl readily attends her bidding, and with a kiss and an expressed hope that she is not very much tired, she sits down beside her.

'Well, Glory, I should like to glean your first impressions of a peep into life. Wasn't it jolly yesterday? How I should like to have it all over again to-day !'

'Not I. I think it is a great deal of fatigue for very little pleasure.'

'Pah ! you are a child. You have yet to feel the intoxicating pleasures of the dance. Of course, as long as you fraternise with Turners, you must inevitably be bored, I was so glad to see poor dear Clive yesterday—he was quite welcome in this barren land.'

'He seems to be a great friend of yours,' said Glory, quietly. 'Several people asked me if you were going to be married to him.'

‘Did they really? What unsophisticated innocence! As if one cannot talk to a man without being supposed to be engaged to him! I am sure I danced with Sir Henry quite as often as with Mr. Clive last night.’

‘Yes, and every time you danced and laughed with Sir Henry, Mr. Clive looked so miserable. I was quite sorry for him.’

‘Oh! then, you can see out of those half-shut eyes of yours. Well, now, untaught mouse, let us have your opinion of last night’s doings—that is to say, as far as I am concerned.’

Glory blushed crimson as she said, hesitatingly,

‘I don’t know much about it, but it looked to me as if you were flirting.’

‘Brava, innocence! There is the making of something in you yet. I did not think you knew the meaning of the word. Now, look here, can you keep a secret?’

Glory bowed her head in acquiescence.

‘Somebody proposed to me last night.’

‘Which was it?’ asked Glory, looking up.

‘Not Turner, so don’t be in a fright.’

‘How absurd you are, Miss Trant! I never thought it was.’

‘You conceited monkey! But I am choking to tell some one, and I don’t dare say a word to mama, so you shall be my confidante. It was Mr. Clive.’

‘Well, and did you accept him?’

‘Don’t be impatient, and you shall hear all about it. He has been on the verge of the little, interesting communication about the state of his feelings very often, but somehow I have always run away from it. It is such a bore to be put in a corner, and forced to answer a question *volens volens*. However, there I was yesterday; but I got out of it without committing myself for the present.’

‘Do you care about him?’ asked Glory.

‘Well, yes, I suppose I do; but it is not necessary to tell him so, is it? Besides, I want breathing-time. He has such queer moods, every now and then he is so fitful and gloomy, he quite frightens me. The best part about him is his utter want of money. Life with him would be a sort of vagabondage, which would be rather jolly.’

‘But you will have money, will you not?’

‘Precious little of that. I suspect. Mama’s jointure goes

at her death to a far-away cousin. I was born after my revered father had departed this life, and that was the way his will was found to have treated his pretty little daughter when she made her appearance on the stage of life. Lively prospect, is it not ?

‘Very much so. I am not surprised you think twice before you consent to marry without money.’

Georgie started up.

‘Good gracious ! that was the last thing which entered my head ! I think it would be a novel excitement to have no money ; but I don’t choose to be won without a little trouble. Now is the hey-day of all my little triumphs and independencies. Once linked on to some tiresome man, I shall have to do as he bids me. Besides, I have not at all made up my mind which I like best—perhaps it is Sir Henry Wilbraham.’

‘I wish it might be, for your sake,’ said Glory ; ‘he is so good and true.’

‘I make no doubt of it, my dear. He is a great deal too good. However, Clive is not to bore me with any more matrimonial allusions for three months at least ; and, in the meantime, we shall see what will happen. Now, mind, you are not to know anything about this matter, or I will put my claws into some of your small projects when you become a young lady of the world.’

Glory laughed, and promised strict secrecy.

‘And now I suppose,’ said Georgie, ‘I must rouse myself from this lethargic matrimonial dream, and get ready for luncheon. I promised Sir Henry to ride with him to Monk-slade, or some queer place, this afternoon. Are you coming, Glory ?’

‘No—he has not asked me. I am going down to the schools.’

‘To meet that little idiot, Turner. Well, I won’t interfere with sport.’

‘What nonsense this is ! I never speak to Mr. Turner. We are both too nervous ever to find anything to say.’

‘So I suppose you take it out in looks. Well, I hope you open your eyes for him. Look here, Glory, take a leaf out of my book, and don’t make up your mind in a hurry.’

‘I hope you will make a wise choice when you do decide,’ said Glory.

'In a round-about way, that is one for Clive, I suppose.' And Georgie laughed as she sprang from the sofa and began to arrange her curls. 'Well, I shall try not to break my heart about either of them. How nasty it is to have two lovers, and not know which is the most likely to let you go your own way through life! I wish there were witches, or fortune-tellers, or some such people in these days. I would go and consult them at once. By-the-bye, the Jews had a singular arrangement by way of oracle—they called it "Bath-kol," or "the daughter of a voice." They dipped into a book, and the first words they came across on opening it, they twisted into an answer to the question which was perplexing them. Suppose we try it, Glory?'

'Oh! Miss Trant, what an odd idea! Where did you learn that?'

'Ah! my dear, you see one picks up a thing or two, living on the outskirts of knowledge. There is nothing like it, you may be sure, provided you don't get entrapped too far inside the pales. But there is the luncheon-bell—come along.'

And the two girls went downstairs together.

'So you really have appeared at last?' said Lady Ida, as her daughter entered the room.

'Yes, mother dear. I have slept the clock very nearly round, and now I think I shall do.'

'You have not much on your mind, Miss Trant, or your slumbers would scarcely have been so long,' said Sir Henry, as he placed a chair for Georgie by the table.

'Well, it is a matter for congratulation, is it not? However, I am afraid I cannot return the compliment. Why, you look as jaded and worn-out as if you had not been in bed for a month.'

'I am not eighteen; and late hours tell when one gets farther on in life.'

'Pooh! Sir Henry, I have seen you after much severer dissipation in London, and you did not look as you do to-day.'

'I daresay the ride to Monkslade will set me up; particularly as I am to be honoured by having you for a companion.'

Georgie was rather taken aback at the aspect of affairs, and, contrary to her usual practice, she ate her luncheon in

silence. She was thinking whether she could have had anything to do with Sir Henry's weary, dejected look, and wondering to herself whether she should hold out to him the hand of amity, and allow herself to be petted and tamed. So the conversation flowed on its smooth, rather prosy way, between the two dowagers of the party—for Glory was never very loquacious, and Sir Henry was watching Georgie. In her somewhat subdued silent mood she was a new study. And so they all sat dawdling over their repast, till the horses were actually at the door; for it was some distance to Monk-slade, and they had been ordered early, that their riders might enjoy a leisurely saunter through those green Hampshire lanes. Of course Miss Georgie did not hurry herself in her preparations. The fact of Sir Henry and the horses waiting for her was not likely to trouble her much. 'The change would do them all good,' was her remark, when Glory suggested that it was quite contrary to all rule at Brinck Hall, where punctuality was ever esteemed one of the highest virtues.

'Every day reveals a fresh bore with which these good people here seem to inflict themselves—by way of penance, I suppose. But I don't intend to worry myself into a fever by getting ready by steam; so, if Sir Henry does not like waiting, he can send the horses away and go to sleep—I am sure I don't care. So don't fuss, Glory, or I shall sit quietly down and look at you till you have finished, for I will not be flustered. There, now I am ready at last,' and she laughed as she looked at Glory's face.

She never dared to keep Sir Henry waiting, and she had worked herself up almost to a frenzy as she pictured how angry he would be over this long delay.

He was sitting quietly on the hall-table when the little beauty went down—the only signs of impatience being evinced by somewhat rapid slashes with his riding-whip against his boot.

'I shall not apologise, because gentlemen should learn to wait pleasantly for ladies,' said Georgie, with a little toss.

The subdued manner she had shown at luncheon was all gone. The thought of the formality which expected her to be ready at an appointed time, or considered unpunctual and in disgrace, had 'riled' this little rebel back to her accustomed bantering, flippant style of talk.

‘Have I complained?’ asked Sir Henry, as he went forward to help her on to her horse.

‘No, but you look a victim, and that is worse. I would rather you had poured out the “vials of your wrath” in good manly expletives. One could have answered them. There is nothing I hate like a martyr. I am sure they will find out they are not as well off as they expect when they reach the next world. They are always such self-satisfied prigs! A good deal of pride will have to be knocked out of them before they are purified.’

‘Oh! Georgie, much as I love to hear your bright sallies on things in general, do let me ask you to find some other subject to jest about than that of the holy martyrs. If you would only think for a moment, your own innate love of what is good and pure would show you how wrong it is, not only to yourself, but to others who must sometimes unavoidably be led, by these careless jests of yours, to think lightly of things which should ever be treated with respect.’

‘You missed your vocation when you did not become a parson,’ said Georgie. ‘How well you would have preached! But, as for everything there is a season, suppose you leave it alone and make yourself agreeable now, or I declare I will turn my horse’s head and go home; for, being admonished once a week, that being on Sunday, is quite enough for my poor little brain.’

Sir Henry was obliged to smile in spite of himself, though he was greatly provoked with Georgie, on whose flippancy the most serious subjects failed to make the slightest impression. It was true he had not slept during the past night, for his thoughts had been too busily occupied dwelling on Georgie’s future to admit of sleep paying him a visit. Clive was the bug-bear which haunted Sir Henry’s couch, and drove away the softening influences of slumber. Though he loved Georgie himself, and had fully resolved, if possible, to mould her into gentleness and order, and win her for his wife, yet Sir Henry had far too strong and well-regulated a mind not to have yielded her up uncomplainingly to a rival she preferred, if he had thought it were for her good; but he had the very worst opinion of Oswald Clive, and trembled lest Georgie, in her foolhardy wilfulness, should entrust her happiness to his keeping. There was one hope which he cherished—poverty might prove a serious obstacle. Georgie,

he knew, was too reckless to care about it, but Clive, he trusted, would have too much sense, knowing himself to be very hard-up, to add to his expenses by burdening himself with a penniless girl. Yet much that he had seen at the croquet-party made his heart ache for the fair girl he would so gladly have sheltered from the storms of life, and nestled down with in the calm happiness of an unrugged, monotonous existence ; but she would not.

During her visit at Brinck Hall he had seen full well that years only would sober that otherwise untameable nature, and that the dull routine of an unexciting country life, with all its prosaic, matter-of-fact little duties, was a mode of passing time at which wilful Miss Georgie would rebel with her whole heart ; while the entire neighbourhood would be kept in a constant state of convulsion by her eccentricities, and unconventional sayings and doings.

To speak to Georgie on the subject of this flirtation of hers would, he knew, only hasten matters instead of checking them ; and Lady Ida was worse than useless as an ally—she would probably repeat to Georgie all he had said, and make her hate him for being a meddler. No, he must wait and watch, while with gentleness and tact he would try to show her the right path.

‘Are you going to be grumpy because I will not let you preach?’ exclaimed Georgie, after a short silence. ‘Come, now, let us be jolly, and pick our neighbours to pieces, if we can find nothing better to talk about. It is too hot to quarrel.’

‘To quarrel with you would be indeed difficult. I do not believe you ever fostered a rancorous feeling against any one for ten minutes in your life.’

‘Oh ! I have one virtue. Well, that is something to boast of. However, I will not take to myself more credit than I deserve. The fact is, it is too much trouble to nurse hatred, even for that horrid Mrs. Baird mama cronies with so inseparably.’

‘Who is Mrs. Baird ? I never saw or heard of her.’

‘I should think not ! She revolves in another hemisphere. She is a bony, masculine, American widow, who has crammed herself with learning, and taken no play, until she has become a very “dull boy” indeed ; added to which, she is always finding fault with me for being a dunce. I should hate her, I think, only, notwithstanding her book-slavery, I am a

pretty fair match for her ; and it is such fun to "rile" the old lady. She gives tea-parties in a dirty parlour. I met such a dear old painter there the other day ; he is going to take my portrait when I have patience to give him a sitting.'

'Very odd society, Miss Trant,' said Sir Henry, half laughing. 'Did you make Clive's acquaintance there by chance?'

'No, Sir Henry, I did not !' And she drew her little self up with dignity.

'No one seems to know much about him,' continued Sir Henry, quietly. 'He comes from nobody knows where, and belongs to nobody knows who.'

'His sister was at your party yesterday. I am sorry to find that you associate down here with waifs and strays.' And Georgie patted her horse's neck and tried to look very unconcerned.

'His sister here yesterday ! You must be dreaming !'

'The wife of that sedate-looking, sickly clergyman, who has a parsonage about ten miles off, is Mr. Clive's sister. He is on a visit to them, so they brought him with them yesterday.'

'Well, this is strange. I was wondering all day where the deuce he had sprung from !'

'Now, then, your curiosity is gratified.' And Georgie enjoyed the joke of the Baronet's evident perplexity.

'I had no idea he was related to these people—not that I know much of them, they live so far off. Is she a nice person?—at all like Clive?'

'I am sure I don't know—I did not speak to her. I always eschew the Church—I find I get quite lectures enough from the laity. Oh ! how I do pity people who are always good—they must lose so much fun and enjoyment.'

'Another random speech,' observed Sir Henry.

'Well, look here, Sir Henry, we made a bond of friendship long ago, now can't you be good for us both ? It would save me so much worry.'

Sir Henry shook his head, and said softly,

'I will help you with my whole heart, if you will give yourself over to my safe conduct.'

'Oh ! anybody could promise that,' she said. 'Well, I must go on as I am for the present, bearing the burden of my own naughtiness. I suppose it will not crush me, unless I begin to think of it.'

‘Oh! Georgie, Georgie, why are you so wilful and independent? Why will you not allow yourself to be loved?’

‘Allow myself to be loved? Everyone has my full permission to love me as much as seemeth to him good, provided he do not exact a reciprocity of the sentiment.’

‘Are you incapable of harbouring a warm feeling in that little heart of yours?’

‘That is a rude question, which I decline to answer. One would think we were lovers, instead of old friends, judging from the way we have taken to quarrelling lately. You presume too much, sir, on your office of Mentor.’

Sir Henry hung his head in silence. Georgie was resolved not to be either wooed or won; and the conversation after awhile drifted into a channel of easy talk. The young lady was very bright and fascinating—any man but Sir Henry would have acknowledged that the ride to those old ruins had been a cheery and a pleasant one. Georgie’s quaint remarks about people and things, when she chose to be amiable and agreeable, as she did choose that day, invariably amused and charmed her listeners. But Sir Henry was too annoyed and vexed at his own want of success in favourably impressing her, to be otherwise than bored by and irritated at her piquant little sallies, and careless, free-and-easy prattle. While Georgie somewhat astonished her *confidante*, Glory, by coolly informing her, on her return home, that the very best thing that could happen to Sir Henry would be to be canonized, for he was too good for any flesh-and-blood woman to marry, and live on the earth with.

‘But single blessedness is not the necessary state of saints,’ suggested Glory.

‘Isn’t it? Oh! I suppose, under Mr. Turner’s tuition, you are well up on the subject? Well, all I know is, if I were Sir Henry’s wife, he would not be a saint long. I would plague the goodness out of him, if I died for it; but I don’t mean to try. Commend me to the sinners.’





CHAPTER IX.

QUICKSANDS

‘**S**ARAH, tidy up the front parlour, and bring a duster. Unless I am looking after you, not a single thing is ever done ; and with all the important work I have on hand, it is quite impossible for me to be always at your heels, you tiresome little drab !’

‘ Drab yourself !’ was the low retort which mumbled between Sarah’s teeth as she drove the furniture about with rough hands ; while Mrs. Baird herself grew busy over the dusting.

‘ Lud a mussy, missis,’ said the girl, ‘ whatever is a-going to ’appen, that you fall to a-cleanin’ ? Bless my stars, this is rare !’

‘ I expect a friend this evening, Sarah.’

‘ Lord, mum, I thort literar’ folk was no judge of cleanin’ ; and looked on cobwebs as picturs. I am sure I heard Mr. Dillon t’other day say as them spiders ought never to be killed, their webs was so wonderful beautiful. Whoever is a-comin’ ?’

‘ I expect the French lady who has called on me once or twice lately. She has promised to take tea with me to-night ; and she is a perfect lady, Sarah—a Countess in her own country ; therefore, I wish her to meet with due respect. See that you dress yourself, and have a clean cap and apron.’

‘ My stars ! and this rumfoozling is all along of that big-eyed woman, whose name I can’t get my tongue round for the life of me. She knows dust and dirt when she sees it, do she ? Well, I’m moighty glad she bean’t my missis.’

‘ Sarah, how dare you speak so ? You have had your own way till you don’t know what you are saying, you

impertinent thing! I shall send you away, if I hear any more of these speeches.'

'Thing, indeed!—wasn't I baptized and christened like yourself? Times is changed when we poor servants is druv about to do the work of two, and then called "things" for our pains.'

'Come now, Sarah, no more of this nonsense. You are a good enough girl when you like. Make the place ready for my visitor, and you shall go out next Sunday afternoon.'

'Humph! Missis is a-drawin' in of her horns,' mumbled Sarah to herself, as Mrs. Baird proceeded upstairs to smarten up her own toilette; 'but all I know is, I ain't goin' to stop here no longer on £5 a year, if I'm expected to clean, though I be a work'us gurl wot never had no parients.'

However, she bustled about, and made things look as bright as circumstances would permit, though she grumbled the while. Her astonishment, however, at the change in her mistress did not reach its climax till a cake arrived, which Mrs. Baird had ordered during her morning's walk.

'Well, I never! missis is a-goin' it! She'll be transported for debt if this sort of thing goes on. This 'ere lady must be a mighty swell. Why, them people in that big carriage never had no cakes!'

In the course of time, Mathilde d'Aubigné arrived, and was received by Sarah in a clean cap, and by Mrs. Baird in the most unctuous of moods. Mathilde's soft, deferential manner had made a strong impression on the old American, who was, with all her reputed talents, very unused to finding herself looked up to, and treated as a great authority in literary matters. Mathilde had discovered her weakness for adulation, and looking meek and diffident the while, she laid the flattery on pretty thickly. For purposes of her own, she was desirous of making a friend of Mrs. Baird, and she felt that a little acting must be brought in play to achieve this end.

On this especial afternoon it had been arranged that they were to begin a series of delightful little conversations, when the French language and American erudition were to be amicably exchanged. But the *tête-à-tête* was not destined to be of long duration, for they had scarcely warmed into friendly talk, when a knock was heard at the door, and Mr. Dillon and his German friend were shown into the room by the grinning Sarah. Mrs. Baird, as we know, had a slight

penchant for 'old Dillon,' so her hard features relaxed into something like a smile as she shook him by the hand, and upbraided him for his long absence.

'Work, my dear Madam—work must plead my excuse, and I know *you* will acknowledge it to be a good one,' he said, as he turned round to introduce his friend.

But the poor old German's general appearance of seediness did not impress Mrs. Baird very favourably, and she looked rigid and hard as she bowed stiffly to him.

'A philosopher, my dear madam, who has written many a learned treatise. He has just come from the far West, even from your own city of New York.'

Thus, having insured for his friend a more favourable reception, he turned to look at Mrs. Baird's visitor.

'Where the devil,' he thought to himself, 'does Mrs. Baird manage to pick up these pretty women?—why, this one almost beats that little fairy Miss Georgie in looks. I wonder who she is?'

'Presently, however, he was formally introduced, and very speedily won. Mathilde, with her soft, well-modulated voice, and fascinating, gentle manners, was especially calculated to make her way with impressionable old Dillon. Strange that, with his love of beauty, and tenderness for women, he had not found some

Creature not too bright and good
For human nature's daily food,

to brighten his own fireside and gladden his lone life with her smiles. But it was his very love which forbade him to think that a share in his life of toil and hardship was a meet offering to any gentle, loving woman. So they all talked on for some time, and the subject nearest to poor old Sternheim's heart had not yet been mooted. Mrs. Baird had caught a philosopher—a real, living, German philosopher, a chance she did not get every day, and she was not likely to let him off very cheaply. Loud and long was her talk; she quoted Kant and Johann Paul Richter in their English versions, and jumbled together nearly every system of philosophy that had ever been started on the earth, into such a confused and hopeless tangle that the poor old man felt, with Sydney Smith, that a 'flash of silence' would be about the most refreshing thing she could bestow on him. He looked

across longingly at Dillon, but a painter with an eye for the beautiful, who has just made the acquaintance of a pretty, pleasing woman, in a place, too, where he little expected to find anything half so attractive, was not easily to be enticed away from his new plaything. Mathilde herself, however, at last brought him back to a recollection of the purport of their visit, by remarking on the avalanche of learning with which Mrs. Baird was almost annihilating his friend.

‘You have not known Mrs. Baird long, I fancy, or you would be more used to these torrents of words with which she occasionally seeks to drown the senses of her hearers. I must try to stem it, however, on this occasion, for I know my friend Sternheim is anxious to have a little conversation with her about her nephew.’

All the colour forsook Mathilde’s face in a moment. But in a quiet, steady voice she asked—

‘What nephew?’

‘A certain Ralph Baird—do you know him by chance?’

She answered promptly, though she still looked deadly pale,

‘Ralph Baird!—oh! yes, he is such a pretty boy, with lovely eyes!—What of him?’

‘Hurrah! you know him. Sorry to interrupt your conversation,’ he said, turning to the others, ‘but Sternheim, look here, man, this lady knows your missing friend.’

‘Missing friend!’ murmured Mathilde, looking round with a bewildered air; while the old German, who had been very quiet under the infliction of Mrs. Baird’s learning, now grew excitedly interrogative, as to when she had seen him, where he was, and how he was. But the answers he received were not very re-assuring. She had not seen him for some months—then he was in Germany; but she had forgotten exactly where—either at Homburg, Baden-Baden, or one of those towns. She had visited them all, but she had had so much trouble since that her mind was quite bewildered about previous events.

‘And Clive?’ asked the German, ‘that verdammter Clive—was he with Ralph when you saw him?’

‘He was, I believe, accompanied by a gentleman of that name; but, my dear monsieur, you do not think anything serious has happened that you question me thus? I was so captivated by that boy’s rare beauty, that I took the most

vivid interest in him. What can you imagine? You have quite infected me with fear. I should so grieve over any ill that befell that poor dear boy.'

Old Sternheim took this sympathising woman's hand, and kissed it with emotion.

Mrs. Baird, who had been thoroughly silenced by this scene, so unusual a one to be enacted by the matter-of-fact denizens of her dingy parlour, now asked Dillon what it all meant. He told her, in a few words, of the suspicious disappearance of her nephew, and farther explained that he had brought his friend Sternheim to her, hoping for tidings of the missing boy.

'A boy is sent to travel about Europe,' she said, 'with a flaunting ne'er-do-weel like Clive, and then you come and ask me what has become of him! How should I know? He has gone to the bad I should think, what else was there to expect?'

'Oh, Madame—spare—spare—do not make my burden heavier to bear—poor—poor Ralph, if I could only find him!' murmured Sternheim.

'And pray, sir, may I ask what makes this business a burden of yours? Rather, I should think, was his father to blame. Why could he not keep him quietly in the States? but no, he must make a fine gentleman of his son, forsooth, and all I can say is, he has got his deserts.'

'But I—I introduce him to this Clive, who prove so bad a guardian to the boy.'

Mathilde d'Aubigné, who had sat for the last few minutes with downcast eyes listening to the conversation, now looked up and scrutinised old Sternheim carefully.

'It is a strange—very strange story,' she said; 'what makes you think young Baird is lost? Has Mr. Clive disappeared too?'

'Oh no, he is in London,' said Dillon. 'I saw him not long ago.'

'What! you know him too, and yet no one seems to have asked him after the boy? I daresay he has gone back to his mother.'

'I do not know Clive's address; could we get it, think you, at Lady Ida Trant's?' said Dillon, addressing himself to Mrs. Baird.

'The Trants are not in town,' she answered shortly, 'and

I am not going to trouble myself about this business, I can tell you. I have more work than I can get through, without rushing about the world in search of this foolish boy. If his father could not keep him at home when he had him there, why, he had better go and look for him himself.'

'But his poor mother,' said Sternheim, 'think of her trouble—ah, she look so white and quiet, it is a true pain to behold her !'

'Pah, she always was a weak, senseless fool, who made troubles where none existed. She never did know when she was well off, and now I suppose she wants to create a sensation by getting up a hue-and-cry about this petted darling of hers.'

'Let us go, Dillon, mein Freund, let us go,' said Sternheim, growing very excited ; 'here there is no heart—no sympathy.'

Madame d'Aubigné rushed forward and put her hand on the German's shoulder.

'Pardon me, Mr. Sternheim, but I feel for you and with you most warmly—do let me help you. True, I am a stranger in this country like yourself, but still women often have the tact and *adresse* which men want.'

The German pressed her hand.

'Danke, danke, from my deepest heart ; but my head is gone, I know not what I shall do.'

'The first thing to do is to get Clive's address,' suggested Dillon.

'True—true, that is an essential point,' said Mathilde. Then, dropping her voice, 'After you are gone,' she continued, 'I will persuade Mrs. Baird to write for it to these friends of his. You will promise to keep me informed as to how things progress, for I assure you I am most deeply interested.' And she invited the two men to come and visit her at Twickenham on the next evening but one, by which time she hoped, through Mrs. Baird's agency, to have obtained Clive's address.

'Come on, Sternheim, my boy ; we've accomplished a stroke of work there,' said Dillon, as they passed out of the little garden. 'That pretty Frenchwoman will do the trick for us—trust a woman for carrying out what she takes in hand. Isn't she a beauty? By Jove ! there is a face and figure ! Juno herself would pale before her !'

‘Wahrhaftig, she is beautiful, but not happy. She has an anxious, perturbed look.’

‘Well, my dear fellow, she told us she had been in trouble. That is just what makes her so fascinating—“she is touched, not spoiled, by sorrow.”’

‘Always the same lover of the ladies! Ach, mein Dillon, were I but young and fresh, like you!’

‘There is nothing like art for making men appreciate beauty,’ said Dillon; ‘and there is nothing like a thorough appreciation of the beautiful for making an old man young again. You shut yourself up with your books and papers till you rub the edge off all your senses. Reason and intellect are all very well, but, believe me, senses were not given us for nothing. I hope, by the way, that you had a dose of knowledge to-day. What do you think of that dried-up philosopher in petticoats?’

‘Sie ist eine verruchte herzlose Frau.’

‘Which, being translated, means——?’

‘That I love her not. I shall go make her visit no more.’

‘No, we will go to the Madame instead. Now, what affinity can there be between those two? Mrs. Baird, however, has her good points, though I acknowledge she did not come out strongly to-day. I should not a bit wonder if, on second thoughts, she were to take up this Ralph Baird story, and become even more energetic on the subject than you are yourself.’

‘I do nothing—I do nothing; I waste the precious time. But my poor head is all verwirrt.’

‘Yes, you are a precious example of a philosopher—there is not a bit of the spirit of endurance to be found in you. I shall have you ill on my hands, if you don’t quiet yourself down a bit, old fellow. Leave this perplexing business alone for a day or two. I feel certain we shall hear something of Clive when we go to Twickenham on Thursday evening. Now, look here, the night is but young—scarcely nine o’clock; where shall we go?’

‘Where you will—I care not. To me it is all lone in this great, strange London.’

‘Well, our immortal bard says—

Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.

What say you to a trial?—it may soothe your troubled mind.

There is a music-hall near my diggings, famed for its glee-singing. Shall we go there ?

‘Ja, ja, in the world always let us be. We may hear something of that Clive. He used to visit every such place.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself ; we are not likely to come across him—he is far too great a swell for us now. Do let me impress it upon you how far better it would be for your brain if you would not think of him for a day or two. I am sure we can depend on Madame d’Aubigné.’

Sternheim shook his head. It was not so easy to forget the one great object of his life. However, he did not wish his private griefs to prove an incubus to his friend, so he tried to throw them off for a time, and take an interest in Dillon’s cheery talk. And they sauntered on through London’s crowded thoroughfares, Dillon drinking in large draughts of the heated metropolitan air, with the gratification only those can feel who have been immured for many consecutive hours between the four walls of an ill-ventilated attic.

At last, when the daylight had been for some time gone, they found themselves in the vicinity of the aforesaid music-hall, into which they turned. A quartette was being sung as they entered, and one of the voices was of such exceeding power and beauty that old Sternheim, who had not expected anything half so good, was fairly taken aback, and almost staggered under the weight of his own emotions. Poor old man, he had had a trying day, and both his mental and physical powers were at their lowest ebb. He sank over-come into a seat.

‘Again let me hear that voice ; it is a Himmel for me—so soft, so sweet, so flattering to the ear.’

Dillon laughed, with his big, joyous laugh.

‘Presently, my good friend, it will come again. Too much at once would not be good for you. In the meantime, let us have something to eat.’

‘Always eat—eat. I can eat no more. For me one meal a day is a feast.’

‘Nonsense ; you are tired and knocked up with your walk. I will stand treat, man.’

And Dillon ordered supper for two. But before it could be served, that lovely voice broke out into a solo, and hushed into silence the otherwise rather noisy denizens of

the room. They were all more or less used to its tones, but, nevertheless, pleurably impressed by their surpassing sweetness. On the old German the effect was marvellous—that voice seemed to be the one thing that was wanting totally to unhinge a mind overwrought by past events. He tossed his arms over his head with a sort of shriek, and then he laid his head on the table and began to sob violently. Several men to whom Dillon was well known came forward to his assistance, and they managed to drag him out into the fresh air. After loosening his cravat, and pouring some brandy down his throat, they seated him on the steps at the outer door, until he should have somewhat recovered. After a little while, when the old man grew less excited and incoherent, Dillon suggested that they should return home, where he intended to give his friend his own bed in the tiny cupboard, hoping that a night's rest would set him up. He went half into the road to call a cab, as he felt sure Sternheim was totally unfit to walk. A hansom coming along at full speed almost knocked him down. He looked up as he moved back—the full lights of the somewhat brilliantly-illuminated Hall fell on the occupants of the cab. One was Madame d'Aubigné, the other—could his senses have deceived him?—was Clive. Impossible though that she could have found him so quickly, and she professed to be but barely acquainted with him. It was indeed past all credence. He had the good sense, however, to make no remark to his friend on what he had just seen, but hurrying him into the cab which now drove up, he resolved that on the morrow he would go by himself to the Twickenham Villa, and not leave unriddled till Thursday evening this new mystery which had arisen on the face of affairs.

And Dillon's sleep that night was not his usual healthful, sound repose. He had made up a temporary resting-place for himself with a few cushions, old clothes, &c., in his *atelier*, among his pictures and colours. It was no bed of down; but that would scarcely have interfered with his slumbers. They were, unhappily for him, fraught with visions. A struggling pale-faced boy seemed to be for ever fighting with a beautiful woman, who, with the fair proportions of an angel, seemed to float about in a sort of sulphurous vapour, through which little devils' heads were peering; whilst they laughed mocking laughs, and ever and anon shrieked forth fiend-like, unnatural yells.



CHAPTER X.

THE COLD GREY MORNING.

THE friendly *tête-à-tête* between Mrs. Baird and her guest did not seem likely to resume its former friendly footing after the departure of the two men.

The old lady was evidently much irritated and annoyed, and she showed her dissatisfaction by a brusque, short manner, and curt, barely civil answers to Mathilde's meek, deferential remarks. For more than half an hour this state of affairs continued. Jerome had arrived to conduct his mistress home ; and Mathilde had not yet ventured to ask for the letter to Lady Ida Trant. That Mrs. Baird would write it after she was gone, she felt fully convinced, for she had quite penetration enough to know that, fond as Mrs. Baird was of giving sharp answers and making rude speeches, in her heart she was longing to know where that unhappy boy was ; and that as soon as she was left alone she would make an effort to learn something of his whereabouts. But Mathilde had her own private reasons for not intending to leave without that letter ; so she rose, and finding some paper, pens, and ink on a small side-table, she placed them before the old lady. Then she knelt beside her, and with her soft, pleading voice, she asked her if she was not going to write just one line to Lady Ida, to enquire if she knew that 'nasty horrid Mr. Clive's address?' Then the ready tear glistened on her dark lashes as she bewailed 'poor dear Ralph' and his supposed fate ;—'he was so handsome,' she said, 'Venus herself would have worshipped him.'

'Lady Ida will not know anything about this man, I feel sure—he is only one of Miss Georgie's dancing beaux ; however, I will write if you wish it,' said the old lady, somewhat mollified.

'Oh, thanks, dear Mrs. Baird ; how good you are !' and

Mathilde kissed her hand with *empressement*. 'Now I will not speak a word till you have finished, and then I can post the letter as I go home with Jerome.'

'There,' said Mrs. Baird, as her ready pen speedily dashed off a few hasty lines, 'you can take it. It is well for you to have a man-servant to flaunt about with; some folks have to go alone.'

'Poor old Jerome, he is not a servant—a humble friend. He was in my father's corps, and nursed me when I was a child. Come here, Jerome, and let Mrs. Baird make your acquaintance. Tell her how long you have known Mlle. Mathilde, and what a naughty child she was.'

The old soldier wanted no further excuse to give Mrs. Baird a highly-coloured account of *cette chère Mlle. Mathilde* and her antecedents, mixed up with frequent mention of *M. son Père le Général* and *cette bonne dame Anglaise* her mother, until the old lady was talked back into high good-humour by hearing such a glowing account of her new acquaintance. In the meantime, Mathilde was tying on her quiet bonnet, and preparing to take her departure. She kissed the old lady affectionately—a gushing proceeding at which the good dame winced—and hoped she might have the privilege of coming to see her again soon.

'And let us pray for speedy news of that dear boy,' she said, as they finally parted for the evening.

'*Allons*,' exclaimed Jerome, when the door was shut, and they were fairly in the street, 'in my young days I once saw Mlle. Mars; I never forgot her, but, *nom de Dieu, Madame*, you would prove a worthy successor!'

'Pah, Jerome, you know nothing about it; you have not heard half the fun. *Tiens, comme elle est paquet, cette vieille là*, but I have played them all pretty well on this occasion. But to business,' and the diffident meek manner changed into fiery resolution now. 'I have wonders to accomplish before I sleep, and you must help me. Where is Mr. Clive? The hunt has begun after that stupid boy; they will be on Clive's track in a few hours; it would be as well to warn him of the coming storm.'

'*Dieu des Dieux, Madame, que faire?* We shall get found out. Why did you go visit that *maligène* old English-woman?'

'A very good thing that I did so, otherwise we should

have known nothing of this business. Very true that we were unmitigated fools to get into such a mess, and that the bubble is pretty certain to burst some day, yet let us enjoy life while we may. In the meantime, instead of looking as if the guillotine were on your neck at this moment, tell me where I am likely to find Mr. Clive. Has he come back to town ?'

'*Oui, Madame*, he is back, I think. He lodges'——

'Bah, what do I want with his lodgings? the last place he is likely to be at, this hour of the evening.'

'To his *antres* madame will scarcely care to follow him.'

'Jerome, you must be possessed with some devil to-night, or you would not contradict me thus. I tell you time presses. I *must* see him, so call a cab and let us drive to wherever he is likely to be, *si c'est à l'enfer même*.'

'*Il n'en sera pas loin*,' growled old Jerome, as he prepared to obey his mistress's order.

'An open cab,' she called after him. 'I want air. That musty room has given me a *migraine*.'

So Madame d'Aubigné and her old servant got into a hansom together; and Jerome having told the driver where to go, they set off at full speed. After proceeding at a rapid rate for some time, they stopped before a house so quiet and dingy in appearance that it seemed uninhabited.

'Mr. Clive does not choose very lively resorts,' remarked Mathilde, as she looked out of the cab. 'Go in, Jerome—see if he is there; if so, tell him to come to me directly. I suppose you know your way; if you had not been here before, you could not have brought me now.'

'*Au service de Madame, on risque tout*.'

Nearly a quarter of an hour passed away before old Jerome re-appeared in company with Oswald Clive.

'Mathilde, this is a surprise. What has happened?'

'Much. Get in here, and let us go somewhere to supper. Jerome,' she said, turning to the old servant, and speaking in rapid French, 'go home quickly, send the *bonne* to bed, and let me in yourself when I arrive.'

Then she and Clive drove off together. The rumbling of wheels over London streets is calculated to check even the most ardent desire for conversation; so it was not till they had entered a private room in a house of which Clive

was a frequent *habitué*, that he ventured to repeat his question as to what had happened.

‘A certain Sternheim has come all the way from New York in search of the missing Ralph,’ said Mathilde, quietly.

Clive bounded from his chair as though a sixteen-pounder had suddenly burst in the room.

‘Quiet—quiet, *mon ami*. Do you know this man?’ And she laid her hand on his arm.

‘He introduced me to the Bairds, recommended the boy to my care, and I have broken my trust. Mathilde, I cannot bear his questioning—I will die first!’

‘*Chut!* don’t grow melodramatic. He seems an excitable sort of creature, who can be very easily humbugged; but there was another man with him to-night, who will prove much clearer-headed and more difficult to manage, I fear—also a friend of yours, I believe—one Dillon.’

‘Good Heavens! is there a whole covey of my New York acquaintance going to fly down on me at once? Dillon was a good, cheery fellow, though, long ago,’

‘Is so still; but he is too right-minded to be either bought or won, if he fancies that he detects foul play, or I have no eye for character.’

‘But may I ask, Madame d’Aubigné, how on earth you know these people? They are rather a rough lot to be your bosom-friends.’

She laughed as she answered—

‘I have lately made the acquaintance of Mrs. Baird—an aunt of the boy Ralph. If you recollect, he gave me an introduction to her when I talked of coming to England some time since. At her house I have had the good fortune to discover this little plot.’

She felt in her pocket and produced the letter to Lady Ida Trant.

‘See here,’ she said, ‘this is to ask for your address; thy little thought I should find you so soon.’

He put out his hand to snatch it from her.

‘Don’t send it—burn it,’ he groaned. ‘Don’t let *them* know this miserable tale.’

She held it firmly out of his reach.

‘We cannot always trust those we love the best,’ she said, with a scornful laugh. ‘Fair Georgie might smile on you no more did she know all your past.’

He laid his head on his arms and moaned in agony. Mathilde watched him without speaking for some minutes.

'Oswald,' she said, at last, 'I have not come here to torture, but to save you. Now let us be practical. You must leave England to-night, if possible—at farthest to-morrow morning, and remain hidden for a time. Confound that Ralph ! if we had only his body to show his friends, it would be something ; but this kind of Speke business is so very perplexing and unanswerable.'

'Leave England !—oh ! Mathilde, better to die at once than to be hunted through the earth like this !'

'Don't be a child. Bright days may be in store for you. *Nil Desperandum*. My star is not in the ascendant, but I never lose courage. That dotard of a husband of mine has lost his head altogether, and he will neither die nor give me any money, so I shall have to turn my talents to account soon, for I have only 300*l*.'

'Can I help you?' asked Clive. 'I have lost largely lately, but still I am not quite reduced to pauperism yet.'

'Not at all—not at all, my friend. I can take care of myself—you do the same. When did you come to town?'

'To-day, about six o'clock.'

'Have you been to your lodgings?'

'Not yet. I left my portmanteau with the porter at the house we have just left.'

'Then, don't go near your lodgings to-night, and call for your portmanteau in the morning, *en route* to catch the early train for the Continent. Should these people succeed in finding out your London address, there the information will end. It will be imagined that you, too, have met with a mysterious fate. Disappearance number two—*ah ! ces bizarres Anglais !* Now I think that is very prettily devised, and a practical view of the case, which, if well carried out, will put the bloodhounds off the track for the present.'

'*Cui bono ?*' asked Clive. 'I shall fall in with them sooner or later, and have to endure their cross-questioning.'

'Nonsense !—take heart. I will send faithful Jerome abroad, and see if he cannot make a good story out of what now seems a bad one.'

'Georgie !' murmured Clive, half to himself, as he sat gazing on vacancy with a dejected mien.

'You do not mean to say that you have hampered yourself with that foolish girl? I always knew you were weak, but I could not have believed you were such an idiot as that. You must give her up—do you hear?—give her up! Now don't look aghast, as if there were such a vain thing as honour in question. That is a fragile commodity you ought not to have much scruple about breaking. You owe it to me as well as to yourself not to let this girl know your whereabouts, and before you leave this room you shall swear to me to keep it a secret from her. If you deceive me, trust me for finding it out, and, totally disregarding the share I have had in the matter, I will give the history of past events every publicity I can.'

He put up his hand deprecatingly.

'Hush! Mathilde; it requires but little courage to trample on a worm. I have no alternative but to do your bidding. Poor little Georgie! she shall not be made wretched by having the weight of my sins on her innocent young heart, if I can help it.'

'Spare her the oppression, by all means; it were better for everyone concerned. The question is, can you be trusted?'

'In this matter, most implicitly.'

'*Bien*; now, if we were to start for Twickenham, perhaps it would be as well. I am rather tired, after all the emotions and excitements I have gone through to-day on your behalf. What a fool I am to give myself so much trouble about you!'

They reached Twickenham after a long, dark drive, during which but few words were spoken. The weight of many cares hung heavily on Clive. He was in love with Georgie, and for his love's sake regretted many things which had happened in the past: he could not view them with the same reckless, careless spirit which made a career of adventure, even though it were fraught with a certain amount of danger, a sort of second life to Mathilde d'Aubigné. She would not willingly have given up this wild, changeable existence. Money, wherewith she might satisfy her personal wants and little coqueties, was all she craved, and she had but few scruples as to the means by which it was to be obtained. The only thing Mathilde would not do in order to indulge in riches, was to lead a humdrum matrimonial life

of monotonous, respectable ease. Independence, she said, stood first on the list of this world's good things.

And before the sun's rays hung in the air, and the sweet, fresh morning had fully developed itself into day, Clive stood in the Twickenham drawing-room ready to depart. Mathilde entered, in all the splendour of her rich, full beauty, her auburn locks hanging in heavy tresses down almost to her knees. What a contrast between that brilliant-looking, fiery woman and the meek, calm heroine of Mrs. Baird's back parlour !

'I could not let you go without a word,' she said, 'so I have broken through my rule, which is never to get up till the world is aired, and have come to see you safely off. Poor dear Oswald, you must not be down-hearted,' she murmured softly, as she gazed up in his eyes, and read the look of despair they so freely told.

Then she ran her soft white fingers through his hair, and smoothed it back off his gloomy forehead.

He stooped and kissed her.

'Mathilde, farewell ! I shall not be able to endure the weight of this oppression long. If I sink under it, and we meet no more, say, should she ever want it, that you will befriend Georgie. Her mother is a strange, queer sort of being ; poor Georgie is a bright, wayward little stray. It might be that some day you could do her a service—for my sake, will you promise to bestow your woman's loving-kindness on her ?'

'Good Heavens, Oswald, do you think me superhuman, that you ask me this ? By every law of nature should I not hate Georgie—hate her unto death ?'

'Wherefore ?' asked Clive, looking bewildered ; 'she has done you no wrong.'

'Done me no wrong ! Has she not robbed me of your love ? In the annals of humanity did you ever hear of a woman loving her rival ?'

'I thought we were but friends now—that the old passion had burnt out. You set me free yourself.'

She turned her head away for a moment before she spoke, and then answered calmly,

'I did—so let it rest. For once I have a fancy to practise a little Christian virtue. It may stand one in good stead when the reckoning comes.'

'Hush, Mathilde! leave religion alone. You and I have paid too little heed to it. We can scarcely afford to talk about it.'

'True, Mr. Clive; and yet you expect me to rise to the very extreme of religious training, and exercise an amount of self-sacrifice which saints have barely attained.'

'I did not think my request would have cost you so much.'

'Didn't you?—men never stop to weigh the amount of benefit they expect to receive at the hands of a woman.'

'Oh! Mathilde, we are about to part—perhaps for ever. Do not let it be in bitterness!'

'Part for ever! because you are going to work the foreign gaming-tables for a few weeks? How absurd you are, Oswald! The solemn grey of this cheerless morning makes you melancholy—see, there is Jerome, waiting to let you out. You will be late for the train. As for Georgie, I will promise not to murder her while you are away.'

'Which means you will be good and kind to her.'

'Which means nothing of the sort. I am not going to trouble my head about her in any way. I only hope she will think you faithless, and take another mate. You are safe to get into a mess if you mix yourself up with any of these high-class young ladies, with dozens of inquisitive relations fussing after them at every turn, and inquiring into everything. Your past will not bear scrutiny, *mon cher*.'

'I know it well,' he said, dejectedly; 'but the day Georgie Trant becomes Lady Wilbraham I shall cease to live.'

'This beautiful world! And you would quit it at the caprice of a doll like that! You must be ill this morning, or you would not talk such trash. Wanting in religious influences as you say I am, yet I should pause and meditate a little before I rushed headlong into the great hereafter. The past life that crushes you here will weigh heavier still in that undiscovered future. Yes, I think of these things sometimes, though I am such a sinner. J. J. Rousseau was a paragon neither of morality nor of sanctity, but listen to him: "*Chaque fois que tu seras tenté de sortir de la vie, dis en toi-même, que je fasse encore une bonne action avant que de mourir. . . . Si cette considération te retient aujourd'hui, elle te retiendra demain après demain, toute la vie; si elle ne te retient pas, meurs, tu n'es qu'un méchant.*"'

‘Most bewildering of mortals, are you an angel or a fiend?’ said Clive, as he looked at Mathilde, who, excited over the subject, was standing erect, gazing on him with flashing eyes.

‘Neither; but like all other very mortals, bearing in my nature a strong admixture of good and evil, though, alas! with me the evil preponderates, yet I have enough of fear left in me to make me dread “that something after death which puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of,” as your great bard has it; and I strongly recommend you to do the same. And now you really must go. Live and be prosperous, and let me speedily hear of your well-doing.’

And thus in the stillness of that grey morning they parted. Mathilde, throughout that day, was quieter and stiller than was her wont; and her answers to old Jerome, when he addressed her, were querulous and short. The old love was not quite extinct yet, and the sight of Clive unhappy, and at war with himself, had not been a pleasing one to Mathilde; and she could not get rid of the recollection, though she tried to amuse herself with every imaginable bit of vanity to which feminine nature is so prone.

It is written somewhere that ‘Une femme qui chiffonne est sacrée.’ But, regardless of Mathilde’s occupation, about four o’clock, as she was engaged in arranging numberless little fallals, Mr. Dillon was announced.

‘What on earth can he want here to-day?’ she murmured to herself, as she threw her work on one side, and prepared to go down to the drawing-room. Nevertheless, she gave just one glance at her pretty head as she passed the looking-glass, and was all smiles as she shook hands with her new acquaintance, and inquired in her soft voice after Mr. Sternheim.

‘He is very ill—so ill, I fear an attack of brain fever. His nervous system seems to be entirely unstrung.’

‘Poor dear man, I am so sorry! He is so full of feeling about that dear young Ralph. But I am not surprised. Did you know him, Mr. Dillon? He is—I must say is—such a handsome, sweet boy—*un jeune Narcisse*. I shall be so glad to hear of him!’

Dillon made no direct answer, but said he feared he had been guilty of a want of politeness in not offering to see

Madame d'Aubigné home on the previous evening, particularly as she lived so far out of town.

'Oh ! thank you,' she said, smiling ; ' but my old servant, Jerome, always comes for me when I am out late.'

' Were you late last night ?'

' Not very. He came to Mrs. Baird's between nine and ten.'

' Have you heard anything of Clive ?' was the next question, rather brusquely put.

Mathilde looked at him, and was *en garde* in a moment.

' I wish I had,' she said. ' But there has not been time for an answer to the letter yet. Mrs. Baird wrote it after you left.'

' I thought I saw you with Clive last night.'

For a moment there was just a deeper tinge on Mathilde's cheek, then she laughed.

' Me !—with Mr. Clive ! Where ? Mr. Dillon, are you given to illusions ? Why did you not speak to us ?'

' You were driving in a hansom.'

' A mistaken identity,' said Mathilde coolly ; ' you shall be satisfied,' and she rang the bell. ' Jerome, tell this gentleman it was impossible he could have seen me driving in London with Mr. Clive last night. Tell him at what hour you and I arrived here together.'

' About ten o'clock, sare—we come straight from the English lady's house, and madame go to bed at once with a *migraine*.'

' I had not thought there were two Madame d'Aubignés in the world,' said the bewildered Dillon, as he felt bound to accept these plain facts.

In Madame d'Aubigné his faith was somewhat shaken ; her home and her own appearance to-day betokened a very different person from the being he had seen in Mrs. Baird's parlour yesterday. And in his man's familiar language the word ' humbug ' came uppermost. Yet the old servant could have no interest about the matter ; the story must be true, or she would not have sent for him. Poor, easy Dillon, he was not long-sighted enough for Mathilde d'Aubigné. He had not studied his Pascal either, or he would have known ' Qu'il y a des gens qui mentent simplement pour mentir.'



CHAPTER XI.

ANTIPATHETIC.

‘**W**ELL, mother dear, does not the rust want rubbing off the literature, after the long sojourn we have made in this mouldy corner of the earth?’ asked Georgie, as she entered her mother’s room two or three mornings after the ride to Monkslade.

Lady Ida seemed to be very busily engaged with her correspondence, nevertheless she looked up and smiled at her pretty daughter.

‘I had hoped you would have been content to settle down here for the rest of your life,’ she said.

‘What ! have you turned match-maker, mama? Is that the last new hobby? Out of charity to me, for goodness’ sake give it up ! You are safe to make a mess of it.’

‘It is much more likely that you will do so, you naughty child ! Look here,’ and she threw Mrs. Baird’s note across the table for Georgie to read.

‘Mr. Clive’s address !’ exclaimed Georgie, her face all aglow ; ‘confound that woman’s impudence ! What will she ask for next? Do you know it mama?’

Lady Ida shook her head.

‘Then neither do I.—The Saints and Sir Henry forgive the fib !’ was the little theatrical aside. ‘We are not to be supposed to know where every man lives that we meet in society. It is like Mrs. Baird’s low-bred impertinence to imagine it.’

‘My dear Georgie, you have brought it on yourself by your great apparent intimacy and constant flirtation with Mr. Clive.’

‘Have I? Well, that is not Mrs. Baird’s business. I am

not going to be reminded of what is, and is not, decorous by that old oddity. Good gracious, what a spirit of interference there is rife in the world ! However, the only effect it has on me is to rouse a strong counter-spirit of contradiction. But I did not come here to talk of that old mummy, who looks as if she had been dried in the leaves of her own dictionaries. I am very tired of this comatose existence, *mama mia*, and I want you to make a change into a more congenial atmosphere.' And Georgie put herself in her favourite posture on a footstool at her mother's feet, and cooed over her and caressed her till she had gained her point.

They would go to London for a week or two, as Lady Ida had some business to attend to there, and then to Paris for the Autumn. And, having succeeded in talking her mother into what she called 'rational common sense,' the young lady was radiant. Sir Henry, however, looked very blank on hearing of this proposed continental trip, and he resolved that to Paris he too would go. To leave Georgie alone in that strange place, with no guiding rein, no monitory voice at hand, would, he thought, with his English prejudices, be exposing her to great danger. Lady Ida, we know, he esteemed powerless to stem the current of her daughter's waywardness.

So, a few days later, they bade adieu to Brinck Hall and its inmates—on Miss Trant's part with no feeling of regret though, as she looked back on Sir Henry's grave, sorrowful face, watching them as they drove from the door, she said to herself—

'Poor dear man ! what a pity he is such a saint, and I am such a sinner ! A little more of the happy medium about both of us, and we might have accomplished unity ; but it can't be helped.'

Georgie's first thought on reaching London was of Clive ; but he faithfully kept his promise to Mathilde d'Aubigné, for day after day passed away, the time was fast drawing near for the Trants to leave for Paris, and neither a line nor a word had reached Georgie from her absent lover. She was naturally of too gay and sprightly a temperament for sorrow over his defection to sit very heavily upon her ; yet those who knew her well would occasionally have detected a pink shade about her pretty eyes, and a paler hue than was wont about her sonsy face. She tried to deceive herself into the

belief that she did not care ; but few women can brook neglect without a pang, and Georgie was not an exception to the rule. She felt bored and tired, without exactly knowing why ; and London at the beginning of September is not the place, of all others, most likely to enliven a love-sick maiden. But it was an improvement on the country, thought Georgie, for there were people to be seen, and people, however uninteresting, were better to look at than green trees.

So Georgie seemed to find it, for she spent the greatest portion of her day gazing out of the window on the passers-by. She was weaving a romance, she said—speculating on what each person's individual history might be. But this was too tedious and weary a pastime to be of long duration, and Georgie, totally ignoring the somewhat summary dismissal she had received the last time she had ventured into Mrs. Baird's parlour, resolved to accompany her mother on her next visit to the old American. She might fathom the reason of Clive's silence, she thought ; Mrs. Baird might have been successful in finding him. Besides, she was very curious to discover what that seedy set of people could want with the handsome, dashing Clive. And the young lady, having made up her mind to beard once more the old lioness in her den, was not long in carrying out her determination, and the following day she persuaded Lady Ida to take her.

Mrs. Baird received her with more civility than was her wont. Mathilde d'Aubigné was with her, and she was in one of those bland humours into which Mathilde, by some mysterious power, generally succeeded in soothing her. Madame d'Aubigné rose as Mrs. Baird's guests entered ; and she and Georgie looked each other over with that rapidity of glance which is peculiar to women. If there be such a sentiment as antipathy at first sight, Georgie felt it in every fibre of her frame. Why, she knew not ; but as she looked on Mathilde d'Aubigné, with her *svelte* form, her well-shaped face, beautiful in its rich colouring, and her coils of auburn hair, a sick, faint feeling seemed to creep over her heart, and it was with an effort that she kept herself from crying. Mrs. Baird need fear no darts from Georgie's pert little tongue ; the sight of the strange Frenchwoman, for a time at least, had completely mesmerised her. And Mathilde, totally unconscious of the

effect her presence had produced, was rather favourably impressed by the fair girl Clive's parting words had committed to her woman's love; and, true to her half promise to him, she was anxious to cultivate Georgie's acquaintance, and find out for herself of how much solicitude she was really worth. But Georgie was not to be fascinated into one of her joyous, cheery moods, or her piquant, racy retorts would inevitably have taken Mathilde, who loved everything that was bright and clever. Georgie, for her, was taciturn, and her answers to Madame d'Aubigné were almost monosyllabic.

'So you could not send us Mr. Clive's address?' Mrs. Baird presently growled to Lady Ida. 'It is very strange that that man is nowhere to be found.'

Georgie's quick ears, unengrossed by Mathilde's conversation, caught the words, and curiosity got the better of the awed antipathy the sight of the Frenchwoman had evoked. Nature peeped out, and she asked glibly—

'What on earth do you want to find Mr. Clive for, Mrs. Baird? I did not think young men belonging to the fashionable world interested you. He is not, by chance, a Voltaire or a D'Alembert in disguise, is he?'

'It would be a good thing for him if his disguise covered any one half so respectable,' was the answer.

'As those great Atheists! Well, I don't profess much sanctity, but from my cradle I have been taught to look on Atheists with horror. What a pity it is that Atheism and philosophy are synonymous!'

'Young lady, you allow your ready tongue to carry you too far, and you talk of matters of which you know nothing. Take care, however, that you do not do more than *talk* of what you know nothing, when you mix yourself up with that vagabond Clive.'

Georgie grew crimson with rage. She seldom gave herself the trouble to be angry, but in the defence of the absent Clive she was prepared to fight bravely.

'Prove your words, or you shall eat them!' she said. 'How dare you malign the absent, you vindictive——!'

'Hush, Georgie, hush!—I *will* have no more of this,' said Lady Ida. 'What is Mr. Clive to you, that you should take up his cause thus? Doubtless Mrs. Baird knows more of him than you do.'

'Does she? Then let her tell us what she knows—I hate hints.'

'I never saw him, and never wish to see him,' said Mrs. Baird. 'The confusion of tongues there has been in this room at various times since I first heard that man's name, has been worse than the Tower of Babel.'

'Then, why should you speak of him thus? Mr. Clive is a friend of mine—a great friend—and I will not stand quietly by and hear my friends abused by any one.'

'Georgie, Georgie,' whimpered the mother, 'it is not *comme il faut* to hear you thus publicly proclaiming your friendship for a gentleman. Ostracism from good society would have been the penalty for such talk in my young days.'

'Let me thank the gods, then, that I was born in another age, mother dear; but never mind that now—let us return to our subject. What has Mr. Clive done to call forth all this vituperation?—there is a neat thing in long words for you, Mrs. Baird.'

'I decline to enter into any explanation. When flippancy and pertness are brought into the argument, it is time for sensible, intellectual people to be silent,' growled the old lady, fairly bristling with rage.

'Cause dismissed—no case; the principal witness having failed to establish any substantial evidence against the absent delinquent!' And Georgie, who seemed to have recovered from the transitory chill Madame d'Aubigné's presence had inspired, was quite herself again, and laughed merrily at having had the last word, and 'riled' the Yankee enemy; for the old woman seemed determined to say no more, and sat rigidly erect, her lips tightly compressed, her forehead wrinkled by an angry frown.

'Do you always defend your friends thus warmly, Miss Trant?' asked Mathilde, in her soft, luscious, half-foreign tones.

'Of course I do, when they are really my friends—don't you?' answered Georgie, sharply.

'In France a woman's friendship for a man is generally called love, which some poet suggestively describes as "*la folie de l'amitié*."'

'When you have been in this country longer, you will learn that English girls can be above mawkish sentimentality,

and enjoy a good honest platonic friendship with beings of the opposite sex, and improve their heads by sensible talk, without injuring their hearts.'

'Human nature is human nature in every country,' said Mathilde, smiling. 'I have no faith in this absence of passion. Platonism cannot exist between a man and a woman, unless the heart of one or the other of them be filled with the image of some third person.'

'Oh!' said Georgie, with an acerbity unusual to her, for there was something about Madame d'Aubigné which irritated her intensely, 'that is a terse description of the law of nature between the two sexes, taken from a French point of view, is it? Pray, may I ask how you account for that not unusual anomaly, when more than one individual awakes an amatory flame in the same breast at the same time?'

Mathilde d'Aubigné's large eyes dwelt for one instant with a meaning look on Georgie. Was this tartly-delivered sentence meant for a sting?—or was it but the accidental sharpness of an unchecked tongue? However, she answered quietly—

'It is a phase of frail humanity which has never been my study.'

'What a blessing for you! Have you, then, never lain awake at night wondering whom you loved best?'

'There is a skeleton in every cupboard. I have had other subjects of worry and grief.'

'Well, never mind your griefs, imaginary or otherwise, just now; while the antiquities are discussing some dried-up old subjects interesting to themselves, tell me why there is all this fuss about Mr. Clive?'

'How should I know?' asked Mathilde, with a little start at the suddenness of the question.

'How should you know! Do you think I am such a fool as not to be well aware that "old Growler" would not have you domesticated here, tame cat fashion, without communicating to you the history of Mr. Clive's supposed evil doings?'

'His supposed evil doings!—then you believe him to be immaculate?'

'Never mind what I believe of him. I have told you once, he is my friend.'

'What do you wish to know?'

‘Where he has gone.’

‘Just the question which puzzles Mrs. Baird. Did she not tell you he had disappeared?’

Georgie stamped her foot.

‘What object can you have in provoking me by these cool answers? What did Mrs. Baird want his address for?’

‘In order that she might communicate with him I suppose.’

‘Do you want to make me an enemy for life?’

‘On the contrary, Miss Trant, I am most anxious to have you for a friend.’

‘Then tell me about Clive, and—you shall have my hand on it—I will *try* to like you.’

‘It does not come *con amore*, then?’

‘Not yet. But never mind that. I will promise to try to overcome the dislike.’

‘Mr. Clive is down at his sister’s place in Hampshire.’

‘Pooh!’ said Georgie, ‘he left there three weeks ago.’

‘Well, then, he has never been heard of since.’

‘Who has been looking for him? What did they want him for?’

‘Nothing of any importance,’ almost whispered Mathilde. ‘He was acquainted on the Continent with a nephew of Mrs. Baird’s, about whom she wanted to ask him some particulars—that is all. But as he is amusing himself in the country, she must wait patiently till he returns. And now, having satisfied your curiosity, are we to be friends?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Not a very encouraging beginning; but I hope you will learn to like me better. May I come and see you?’

‘If you like; but we are going to Paris soon—oh! yes, do, if you have any news of Oswald Clive.’

‘Ah! I see all the *friendship*,’ with a slight emphasis on the word, ‘is reserved for him—there is none left for me.’

‘Don’t chaff me, or I shall hate you. Now, mamma dear, if you have finished your talk, I am quite ready to go. Let us take a turn in the deserted Park; my head aches, and I want some fresh air.’

Lady Ida, ever obedient to her daughter’s whims, rose at once, and having, at Mrs. Baird’s request, given Mathilde an invitation to come and see her, they took their departure, leaving Madame d’Aubigné by no means displeased with her

own tactics. She had secured two influential allies, she thought, in the persons of Mrs. Baird and Lady Ida ; and had performed part of her promise to Clive, by telling only a half-truth concerning the search that had been instituted for him, thus refraining from unnecessarily stabbing the heart of the fair girl who seemed now to be his first thought in life. Mathilde too was not disposed to be personally inimical to Georgie—there was something refreshing about her piquant, on this occasion almost rude, talk, with which Mathilde, hating as she did anything like mannerism and formalism, was not a little taken. And though she felt that every effort must be used to prevent Clive from allying himself with this scion of the aristocracy, yet she could scarcely condemn his preference.

‘He has not communicated with her since he left England—that is something to know, at all events,’ she thought to herself. ‘But how thoughtless and remiss of him not to have written me a line ! I should like to know to what spot on earth he has betaken his wandering steps.’

And what were Georgie’s thoughts as she drove through London’s almost deserted streets ? Lady Ida’s brain was revolving an important female labour project about which Mrs. Baird had been propounding a new, and, need we say, a very unfeasible theory, so that Georgie was left to the uninterrupted indulgence of her own meditations. It was not often that she allowed the course of her mother’s ideas to flow on their even way, but on this occasion she was too perplexed about her own affairs to shape her feelings into words ; besides, she was far too sharp to have much faith in her mother. To her honour be it said, she always behaved towards her with affectionate solicitude ; and though she laughed not unfrequently at her little twaddles and foibles, yet, even when she allowed her tongue to have its greatest freedom, there was no unpleasing picture of a broken fifth commandment. But Georgie was too keenly alive to her mother’s total want of common sense to value her opinion about any of the social relations of life. ‘There is a vagueness about mamma’s reasoning,’ she was wont to observe, ‘which makes one feel as if one were alone in a desert.’

Owing probably to her education, and the love we mortals have for opposites, there was nothing Georgie hated

like a theory ; and a theory revolving itself round her personal relations with Oswald Clive would, she felt, almost drive her mad, and only serve to mystify still more what was beginning to be a very dense entanglement. So she turned over and over in her mind the minutest details concerning her absent lover, now waxing hot with anger at Mrs. Baird's innuendoes, then shivering as she thought of the chill her introduction to Mathilde had produced ; and as she got farther involved in her dream, she began to wonder whether that handsome but crafty-looking Frenchwoman had anything to do with Mr. Clive's silence. Altogether, she concocted a very pretty little romance. Before the drive in the dreary old Park was over, with the impetuosity incidental to her nature she resolved to give the whole thing up, as too much wear and tear for her nerves, and never to think of those two stupid women and their vile plots, or that arch-deserter Clive, again.

'So that is settled,' she exclaimed, as she stretched herself somewhat noisily, and began to look about her, as though the few objects which showed there was 'life in the old town yet' had suddenly become possessed with an intense amount of interest.

'What is settled? Oh, Georgie, you quite startled me ! I wish you would not be so very demonstrative !'

'Pardon, dear mother ; I am sorry if I brought you back too abruptly to the realities of life. But it is settled, is it not, that we go to Paris next week? I was thinking how delightful a peep into French life will be, and, I suppose, gave utterance to my feelings rather freely.'

'I am sure I hope I am doing the right thing in taking you to Paris. I do trust you will be circumspect, and not get into any unladylike entanglements. You are so very careless, both in your talk and actions, my dear child. You quite unnerved and upset me this afternoon. Now, whatever happens, recollect I shall never take you to Mrs. Baird's again.'

'All right, mother mine. I have had quite enough of old Parchment to last my life ; and as for being afraid of me in Paris, recollect my knowledge of French is not very extensive, so my tongue will be somewhat tied ; and, Frenchmen having a strong affinity to monkeys, I am afraid they will even beat me at grimaces. Of course I shall try to

make myself as agreeable as circumstances will permit ; but don't fear, *madre mia*, I will take care of myself.'

'Never serious for a moment ! Oh, Georgie, what will sober you?'

'Hush, mother, don't speak of it—trouble, when it comes. Pray God to keep it off, and me fresh and joyous, to the end !—for I love Him who reigns above, notwithstanding my wild talk, and you too, my darling mumsey, not a little ;' and there was an unusual emotion in light-hearted Georgie's look and tones which astonished Lady Ida.

Strange that a foreshadow seemed always to pass over Georgie's lightsomeness whenever any allusion was made to the time when she should have ceased to regard life in its brightest colouring.





CHAPTER XII.

A GOOD DEAL OF HUMBUG.

THE announcement of 'To Let, furnished,' printed on large, sprawling bills, decorates the windows of the pretty Twickenham villa. Madame d'Aubigné's term of tenure is nearly at an end, and with it the supply of money necessary to keep up her life of luxury in this charming retreat. The numberless little bits of bric-à-brac which are her delight have been packed up, and the large cases containing them are arranged in desolate array in the hall. Old Jerome mounts sentinel over them, looking the very picture of despair, while ever and anon the tears glisten in his poor old eyes.

'Go and smoke a pipe, Jerome, and cheer up your drooping spirits. Life is too short to waste it in vain regrets, *mon brave*;' and Mathilde, attired in the sober habiliments of meekness and decorum, laid her hand on the old man's shoulder. It wanted but this little mark of kindness on the part of his young mistress to sweep away all old Jerome's efforts at self-control. He laid his head on one of the cases and fairly sobbed aloud. A man in tears! methinks a reader exclaims; but, reader, remember he was upwards of seventy, and a Frenchman!

Mathilde looked provoked—these emotions were in her way, and they irritated her. The fidelity of this faithful old dog was very pleasing, but she would rather it had shown itself in obedience than in snivelling.

'Come, come, Jerome,' she said, 'don't be a fool. You have not turned poltroon in your old age, surely! If I can face unflinchingly the troubles of life, cannot you do so?'

'With you, Mlle. Mathilde, I can suffer all, but to leave you, *oh, quel misère*! Ah! you are coming back?' and he started as he observed for the first time that Madame d'Aubigné was dressed to go out.

‘Of course I am, you old *bête*. I am only going out on business ; when I return you shall hear all about it.’

Then Mathilde d’Aubigné sallied forth. The first place she went to was a small house in a quiet street at the West-end of London, where, having gained admittance, she remained for some time ; and there was a look of calm satisfaction on her face when she once more crossed its threshold, and pulled down her veil as she came out. She called a cab, and gave the direction, ‘Grafton Street, Pimlico.’ What could Mathilde d’Aubigné want, that she so frequently bored herself with the companionship of Mrs. Baird ? For to Mathilde, no less than to Georgie Trant, was the hard-headed old American a sort of *bête noire*. Patience !—a crisis is at hand. Mathilde has not given up the pretty house on the banks of the Thames, or arranged to part for a time with old Jerome, without having some project cut and dried—a project, too, in which she intends Mrs. Baird to play somewhat of a prominent part ; so having been admitted by Sally into the dingy old parlour, she prepares at once to plunge into the object of her present visit.

‘You scarcely expected me so early in the day, my dear Mrs. Baird. I trust I am not interfering with work, but Jerome is going to France, and you mentioned some rare old Latin book, the other day, which you had failed to obtain in London. I thought perhaps he might prove more successful in Paris—he is very persevering.’

‘Jerome going to France ! I thought he was part of yourself—your very shadow, in fact.’

‘When clouds are thickest, shadows vanish ; but to leave metaphor, I cannot afford to keep him any longer ;’ and Mathilde looked down with a sigh.

‘Good gracious ! I had no idea you were in difficulties.’

‘Only for a time, I hope. You see this terrible illness of my poor husband prevents his affairs from being administered, and his family are very unkind to me. However, as long as I have health and intellect left to be thankful for, I shall not starve, I hope. Jerome will be happier with his own kith and kin ; so I am going to send him home.’

‘Never mind Jerome—I don’t care about him. What are you going to do?’

‘Well, I am quite prepared to work, and I trust I have found an opening, only——’

‘Only what? Don’t let it escape if you can help it. You know what Lord Bacon says, “Occasion turneth a bald noddle after she hath presented her locks in front, and no hold taken.”’

‘*Au diable* with Lord Bacon!’ thought Mathilde, but she could not resist a smile, though she answered quietly—

‘It shall not be my fault if a hold be not taken. I have been offered a position as French companion to a young lady. Everything sounds very pleasant; her relatives are rich, and I believe courteous. Without the brand of governess, I shall be treated exactly as a daughter of the house.’

‘Never mind the *pros*, let us have the *cons*,’ growled Mrs. Baird in her short way.

‘I am a poor lone foreigner, and I have no one in this country to vouch that I will not steal their plate,’ said Mathilde with bitterness.

‘Humph! then I am no one, I suppose,’ was the curt answer.

‘You will speak for me! Oh! dear Mrs. Baird, how good of you! I could scarcely have expected so much, considering the very short time we have known each other.’

‘There is no interest so great as that begot by intellectual similarity,’ said the old lady quietly, as she sought to stem Mathilde’s well-acted gush of feelings. ‘Are there any more objections?’

‘My husband’s relatives—I dread their anger. True, my father-in-law was only a well-to-do *bourgeois*, but then he was descended from a good old family, and for a woman and a d’Aubigné to work for her bread—I fear they would never forgive it.’

‘Do they supply you with money?’

‘Not a *sou* have I received from them since I came to England.’

‘Then, what has their wrath to do with you?’

‘They may injure me when the monetary arrangements are finally brought about; and farther, having agreed to bear the name of d’Aubigné, have I any right to drag it through the dirt?’

Mrs. Baird drew herself up, and looked her sternest.

‘Perish the age,’ she said, ‘when work becomes a degra-

dation ! Drag a fine name through the dirt, indeed, because you seek to gain an honest livelihood ! The great ladies who flaunt in their carriages, sweep their costly robes in the ante-rooms of folly and vice, and finish their careers of depravity in the Divorce Court, don't drag their high names through the dirt, forsooth ! Yet a little honest, wholesome work is a degradation to a woman !'

Mathilde looked alarmed ; she began to think she had pulled the string too hard, and set too much machinery in motion. She would crush her own cause if she did not take care.

'You are right, oh ! so right, my dear madame,' she said, hurriedly ; 'but still even you will forgive me for respecting the prejudices of my relations, when I tell you that, by disregarding them, I may probably be made a beggar for life.'

'Ay, money—money !' growled the old American, who, with all her honesty of purpose, still had her country-people's love for *l. s. d.* 'but it seems to me that by regarding these prejudices, as you call them, you will starve, till your beloved relations choose to throw you a few crumbs.'

'There is an alternative.'

'Which is ?'

'To assume another name,' said Mathilde, in very low tones.

'I hate deceit,' was the short answer.

'Oh ! so do I. No one knows how much I loathe and detest it,' and Mathilde's look of purity and innocence was acted to the life ; 'but that "men are the sport of circumstances," my dear Mrs. Baird, is an old truth which my poor mother used frequently to quote. There seems no other path open to me. I will, however, be guided entirely by you. Shall I give up this opportunity, bright, lucrative though it seems likely to prove ; or shall I simply drop my husband's name, and return to that by which my friends knew me before my marriage ?'

'Humph ! well, there could be no great harm in that—it is scarcely an alias.'

'Ah ! I am glad you are beginning to see matters in the same light that I do. Oh, the sleepless nights that I have spent ! arguing with myself, combating right and wrong at every issue.'

'And the conclusion you have arrived at is that you will

go forth in harness, and work on the hard roads of life under your maiden name.'

'Yes, with your kind help. Oh! what strength will it give me in those weary hours, when I may feel ready to faint by the way, to know that you approve my doings, and will uphold my tottering steps!'

'Tottering steps!—nonsense! You will be all right; don't be faint-hearted. I will always stand your friend. But now, let me hear some more about this newly-found situation of yours.'

'The family lives in the country,' said Mathilde. 'I have not seen any of them yet, but I have just come from the house of a lady who has undertaken to find the sort of person they require, and to whose advertisement in the *Times* I replied.'

'Very creditable indeed. Young woman, I commend your spirit. Well, go on; tell me who they are.'

'It is to live as companion to Lady Wilbraham's young cousin and charge, Miss Fane; she herself is getting old, and therefore she thinks it desirable to have a young lady in the house. Miss Fane has completed her education, and is represented to be a sweet, docile girl.'

'This sounds very desirable indeed,' said Mrs. Baird, 'and you may rely on me. I will say all that is good and kind of you. The only advice I have to give you is, to put your shoulder strengthfully to the wheel, and do the work set before you unflinchingly, and without counting the cost to yourself. That you are capable of leading a young mind rightly, I make no doubt; but always remember Lord Bacon's wise saying, "Reading makes a full man, talking a ready man, and writing an exact man."'

A scarcely perceptible shrug passed over Mathilde's shoulders.

'I will do my best, of that rest assured,' she said, 'and thank you so much for your share in my advancement. You will not tell this lady aught of my past history, dear Mrs. Baird?' and she leant over the old lady's hand with emotion. 'It will scarcely do to go into this new circle of acquaintance with two names. In future please speak of me as Mademoiselle la Fitte; and kindly keep all this secret from Mr. Dillon, or any of his set; it would not be fair to the d'Aubigné's if my position were generally known.'

‘Oh ! as for holding my tongue, that you need not teach me ; but as to this new name, I shall never get used to it.’

‘To you let me be always Mathilde ;’ and with an effusion of sentiment, she threw her arms round the old American, and gushed forth in endless thanks.

But the ‘matter-of-fact which breaks out and blazes with too great an evidence to be denied’ in Mrs. Baird, soon put a stop to this little outburst, and they talked on quietly and practically till a few minutes later, when Mathilde took her departure, not a little pleased with her morning’s work. And as she thought it all over on her way back to Twickenham, she went up many degrees in her own opinion for the clever aptness with which she had humbugged that far-seeing old American. The effect of the news on Jerome was most ludicrous ; one moment he cut capers of delight over his young mistress’s able manœuvres, then he cried and sobbed over their speedy separation.

‘Now don’t forget, Jerome, when you write, address me as Mademoiselle Mathilde la Fitte.’

‘*Moi, oublier le nom de Monsieur votre Père le Général*—nevaire. What a good *idée* ! But, mademoiselle, some English milord will love you—ask you to be his wife—what will you do then ?’

‘Never fear, Jerome ; I can take care of myself. If old *commère* Baird had discovered that it was a name tainted with play that I feared to take into an English homestead, instead of my pretended dislike to a d’Aubigné turning teacher, I believe the poor old thing would have had a seizure and died of apoplexy.’

Jerome laughed and twinkled till his comical old countenance looked like one of those gutta-percha faces one squeezes into all sorts of odd fantastic shapes.

‘But stop a moment, Mademoiselle Mathilde,’ he said, at last. ‘Your independence you love so—are you going to lose it ?’

‘It will not be past recall, *mon cher*, if I find existence unendurable. Recollect, too, I shall lead a life of luxury, which I can no longer do here ; and trust me for hunting up some adventure to keep myself brisk. It would not have been wise to do anything startling just now ; and the scarcity of funds necessitates some immediate change in this programme. When you come back from France, having

found out all about my precious husband, and also having gone over again the old ground at Spa, then we will hold another conclave. I wonder where Mr. Clive has gone—not one word has he written since he left. I watch the papers with frightful interest ; for, Jerome, I am always afraid he will commit some violence.’

‘*Le suicide, Madame!*—never.’ And Jerome laughed. ‘Mr. Clive is too great coward—weak, madame, weak—he has not character enough.’

‘Well, you don’t seem to have much opinion of him.’

‘*Oh ! il est beau garçon !*—but too fond of *les dames*.’

‘That is quite a new view of things—that a man who loves women must necessarily be a coward,’ said Mathilde, laughing.

‘*Du tout, du tout, Madame. Aimer avec passion une seule femme*—that is ennobling ; but *aimer les femmes en général*—this one to-day, another to-morrow, shows *une faiblesse, un manque de caractère*. Ah ! for me I never trust a woman-lover. According to the caprice of the *maîtresse* who sways him, he will act.’

‘You seem to have studied the theory of love, if you have never put it in practice, *mon brave* ; but, according to your doctrine, as all men are more or less under the influence of women, *ergo* women govern the world.’

‘*Elles en tiennent les cordons, bien vrai*. Head before heart should be man’s motto. It is not that of your Mr. Clive.’

Mathilde looked greatly amused ; she delighted in drawing out old Jerome’s bits of wisdom.

‘You have not got your theory quite right, *mon vieux*. Too much heart will never do anybody harm. It is when the senses usurp the place of both heart and head that we poor mortals become puppets at the mercy of our fellows. But we must not waste any more time in vague talk. We have a great deal to do before I bury myself in my country home. By-the-way, I think I shall go and pay a “sister-of-mercy” visit to-morrow.’

‘Ah ! madame, it seems to me you are always *deguisée* now. When shall I again see you shine *comme l’astre du jour* ?’

‘Patience ! patience ! Endurance and determination will accomplish great things ; but before I leave here, I think it

would be as well to pay a visit to that old German who lies so ill at Mr. Dillon's. They may have heard something of which it were as well not to be ignorant.'

And so, on the following day, Mathilde, carrying with her a small basket of delicacies, started on what appeared to be a mission of mercy to old Sternheim. It was the first time she had ventured into the painter's quarters, and she was not a little struck by their destitute appearance. To one who loved luxury and light, as Mathilde did, it seemed totally incomprehensible how he could live on happily in such a place ; and instead of envying, she felt rather inclined to quarrel with the blessed spirit of content which could endure unmurmuringly so vile an abode. No, she would struggle on for ever and for aye, sucking all the honey she could out of life's flowers, wantonly trampling them under foot when they would yield no more, and then stride over their withered forms without remorse, in search of others farther afield, on which she saw the sweets hanging in rich profusion.

So Mathilde, a very unexpected guest, stood at the door of Mr. Dillon's tiny *atelier*. He was, as usual, hard at work, but, nevertheless, he greeted Madame d'Aubigné with a welcome smile. Although Mr. Dillon's good sense had prompted him somewhat to doubt her truth and candour, yet, as he was the slave of every pretty woman, so he was Mathilde's. Beauty *versus* Common-sense, is, in most cases, a very unequal contest.

'Poor Mr. Sternheim !—how is he?' asked Mathilde, in a tone of great interest. 'I have come to see *him*, not you, Mr. Dillon. You are well and strong, and can find your way to Twickenham, if it please you.'

'That sounds like a reproof,' said Dillon ; 'but, dear lady, how could I leave my old friend? There is no one here but myself to nurse him, and he is, still, quite unfit to be left alone. It is indeed kind of you to come and enquire after him. For the first time in my life I feel ashamed of these two wretched cupboards ; they are quite unworthy to be thus honoured.'

Mathilde smiled graciously as she accepted the rickety chair the painter offered her, and looked round on the not very inviting aspect of his home.

'And you have only two small rooms ! Why, I could almost kneel and worship your disinterestedness. How few

men there are who would burden themselves with a friend to their own personal inconvenience ! Living specimens of Orestes and Pylades are rare indeed in these days, Mr. Dillon. What a subject for a picture !—yourself and that eager, hawk-eyed Mr. Sternheim ; this room just as it is—easel, canvases, old furniture—and that streak of cobwebby light dancing half aslant the tiny window ! Holbein would have seized it for a masterpiece. Oh ! I wish I could paint !’

‘ You have forgotten the ministering angel who, with her presence, deigns to brighten this abode of gloom.’

‘ Bah ! I was not asking for compliments, but the scene really struck me artistically. Tell me, may I see Mr. Sternheim ?’

‘ With all my heart, if you are not afraid to face sickness amid the surroundings of poverty.’ And he at once opened the inner door.

On the tiny bed lay Sternheim sleeping. His arms were folded across his chest, his anxious, struggling features were in repose. He looked calm and happy now. The man who had taken him in, for the sake of old friendship, and who nursed him with a woman’s care, had done all that his straightened circumstances would permit to make him comfortable. If the room was poor, it was, at least, clean—far cleaner than the painter’s studio. A few common flowers in a broken jug stood on a table by the bed, side by side with some physic bottles, an old black tea-pot, and a cracked cup standing on an odd saucer. Mathilde took them all in at a glance.

‘ Highly developed state of heart,’ she thought to herself ; ‘ Jerome was right—it betokens weakness.’

Then she watched the sleeping man. He turned uneasily and opened his eyes. Was there a mesmeric power in those large full orbs of hers, which made him feel her gaze ? Anyhow he was awake now ; but Mathilde nearly started when he looked at her.

‘ It is too late for your picture,’ she whispered to Dillon ; ‘ all the fire has gone.’

‘ To return, I fear, no more,’ was the painter’s subdued answer. ‘ Sternheim, old boy, here is Madame d’Aubigné, who has kindly come to see you. Cheer up, and give her a welcome.’

He feebly extended his hand to his visitor, but spoke not.

'I have brought you some fruit, Mr. Sternheim. It is cool and fresh, and I hope it will tempt you.'

'Danke—many danke. You are gut—too gut to me. Franz here he care for me day and night—lieber, lieber Franz. Will you take me from the city, soon, to the fresh Brunnen once again?'

'He takes me for some one else. Ever since his illness he has called me Franz. I cannot make out who this Franz is—a younger brother long since dead, I fancy. Poor old chap! his mind and memory go back to the far past,' said Dillon, in low tones to Mathilde.

'What do you suppose has caused this?'

'Trouble at young Baird's disappearance acting on an over-excited brain.'

Mathilde grew very pale.

'Why was he so interested in the boy?' she asked.

'Hush, madame, I cannot tell you now. At times he understands more than you think for, and then any mention of these people agitates him almost into madness. Do you know this lady?' asked Dillon, bending over his friend.

'Not Mariechen; no, she is too bright and gay. Poor Mariechen! Oh! she so white and thin—so thin, a strong wind will come and waft her to Heaven, to the God she loves, and she will be happy, so happy, evermore. Liebchen, I shall not be long. When he is found I will come too. See, Franz, my child, I must get strong now; to-morrow we will go. Give me my Alpenstock and your loving arm, and let us make this voyage together.'

'To-morrow, old man—well, we will see.' And Dillon smoothed the pillows, and propped up the old man's head, with a woman's tenderness; and then he gave him some of the fruit Mathilde had brought, while she stood watching them in speechless bewilderment.

'I do not understand—I do not understand,' she said. 'This is very terrible! Oh, Mr. Dillon, I wish I had never come!'

'You are not used to scenes like these,' he answered, pityingly. 'Go into the other room; I will come directly. This poor old fellow will doze again in a few minutes.'

Mathilde took him at his word, and with faltering steps she dragged herself, half fainting, to a chair in the *atelier*.

By the time Dillon joined her, heart was giving place to head, and she was almost herself again.

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked. ‘That old German may live for months. You are not going to keep him here, surely?’

‘I am not going to turn him into the street, my dear madame, and I do not think he has any friend here but myself. Poor, dear Sternheim, he is indeed changed! It is quite heart-breaking to see him sometimes, he is so gentle and childlike in his simplicity. He will lie for hours talking quietly to himself in German, which language I unfortunately do not understand, or I might be able to help him more, poor fellow! Those wretches who have brought him to this have much to answer for. Somebody wants a good cursing; whether it is the boy himself, for his thoughtlessness in keeping silent, or whether it is that harum-scarum Clive and his pals, who have brought some of their damned machinations to bear on him I know not.’

‘Hush, hush, Mr. Dillon!’

‘Pardon me, madame, for using this language in a lady’s presence, but my feelings run away with me. Good heavens! what is the matter? How white you look! Are you ill?’

‘No, no, I shall be better soon. Do not be alarmed; I am only rather upset at seeing Mr. Sternheim. I was not prepared for such a change, and the shock was somewhat sudden.’

‘My fault; I should have told you, dear lady. Forgive me. Can I get you anything?’

‘No, thanks; I am better now—the air will revive me. Good-bye. I’ll send Jerome, my old servant, with some jelly and one or two little things for your friend. I do not think I can trust myself to see him again.’

In vain Dillon offered to accompany her, she would not hear of his leaving Mr. Sternheim; and as he closed the door after her, it was with a sensation of pity for the woman who could let her own feelings interfere with her sense of duty, and prevent her from looking unflinchingly on suffering and misery. Although Dillon gave her credit for possessing more heart than perhaps really existed, yet the summing up of his opinion of her was that, with all her beauty, she was not one of his kind.

And in a very subdued, desponding state, she wended her way homewards.

‘I wish I had never gone—I wish I had never gone!’ she whimpered over and over again to Jerome, when she had given him an account of her visit. The old soldier, however, only laughed, and bade her not to be cast down by the mutterings of that puling old idiot. Jerome had seen too much of the hard, dark side of life to have any compunction for the sufferings of others. The only spark of feeling he possessed was devoted to his young mistress, and he looked on Sternheim’s imbecility as a blessing. The chase after the missing Ralph must abate, if its chief instigator was incapable of action.





CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT IS HIS CRIME ?

IT was a dark, wet night in the early Winter ; but, regardless of the murky state of the weather, Sir Henry Wilbraham was sauntering slowly along the Rue de Rivoli, calmly smoking his cigar. Just in front of him a figure emerged from one of the hotels. He wore a slouching hat, and was wrapped in a large cloak.

‘Clive, or the devil!’ muttered Sir Henry to himself. ‘I wonder what little game you are after, old boy. No good, I’ll warrant. Well, go on, I’ll follow ; it may lead to sport. Poor little Georgie, I wonder if she really loves this big, careless brute?’

Along several ill-lighted streets the two men wended their silent way ; Sir Henry only keeping sufficiently near his companion not to lose sight of him. At last, in a dirty street, not a hundred yards from the Palais Royal, Clive passed under the *porte-cochère* of a dingy-looking dwelling—so gloomy and dirty in appearance that it seemed as though years must have elapsed since any human beings had dwelt there.

Oswald Clive took a quaint-looking Oriental pipe from his mouth—a pipe that had been the envy and the talk of half his set ; and then he gave a soft low whistle. He waited two or three seconds, then he repeated the sound. A small, almost imperceptible door in the wall opened very cautiously, and the faint flicker of a lantern which he held in his hand showed the features of an old hungry-looking man. His face was so lined and seamed by antiquity and want, that you felt as if the angel of Death must have forgotten him, or he never would have been allowed to linger so long on earth.

‘*Le diable boiteux !*’ said Oswald Clive.

The door opened wider and he passed into the house, while old Charon closed it carefully.

Sir Henry stood in the dark shadow made by the gateway, revolving in his mind what this might possibly mean, when another man, and this time evidently a Frenchman, came up, went through the same amount of whistling, uttered the same words, and was passed in the same way into the depths of this mysterious abode. Sir Henry had a good deal of pluck, right-down thorough English pluck, yet he was not very keen about poking his nose any farther into this business. He had a sort of innate English horror of French dens, and was beginning to retrace his steps to his hotel, when Georgie's form rose before his mind. Georgie, with her freshness and her naughty little wild ways, the dupe of this man! Since the fête day in the hot Summer there had been no doubt in his mind about Georgie's liking for Clive, and he believed it was simply the perversity of an innate flirt which had prevented her from forswearing her independence long ere this.

'And I have promised to stand her friend,' thought Sir Henry, as he turned back and leant once more against the old gateway. But to give the same signals as the two men who had already entered, and dive single-handed into the mysteries of this dark retreat, was a piece of bravado which Sir Henry, Englishman though he was, even with Georgie's image to urge him on, was not prepared to encounter, so he seized an old dirty-looking bell-rope which hung above his head, and woke the echoes with its ponderous heavy tones; but no one answered his summons. Silence reigned once more when the peal had ceased, for it was an out-of-the-way street in which this house stood; and only in the distance could be heard the hum of busy Paris. Again and again he rang that bell, for Sir Henry was resolved that some one should answer. At last, at a door on the opposite side of the courtyard, appeared the bent form of the same hungry-faced old man; but this time he was attired in an unmis-takeable night-costume, with a red night-cap dragged well down over his wrinkled forehead.

'*Nom de diable! pourquoi fait-on ce tapage-là ?*' he growled forth in angry accents.

'Where are the gentlemen who passed in here just now?' asked Sir Henry, in very indifferent French.

'Messieurs ! que sais-je moi ? Ici il n'y a personne.'

In vain Sir Henry reiterated the assurance that they had passed into that house not ten minutes before ; the old fellow only answered, with volleys of oaths, that there was no one but himself in the house ; and that it was very hard ' that a *pauvre diable de savetier*, who had to work hard for his living all day, could not indulge in a few hours' sleep at night without being awakened by a *sacré grand Anglais*, who ought to know better.'

With this he slammed to the door, and took his lantern and his weird person back into the interior of this dark, silent mansion.

Sir Henry was foiled ; but he resolved, if possible, to return on the following night, with a friend, and, by using the signals of the initiated, to gain admission into these forbidden precincts. And so he walked slowly back, thinking of Georgie as he went along, and wondering whether it was utterly useless for him to try to tame this wild little spirit, and take her down to his old Hampshire Hall, to become a useful member of society, and look after his domestic concerns, as well as his pet schools, model cottages, &c. ? And the practical man, as he puffed away at his cigar, revolved in his mind many schemes which Georgie, as Lady Wilbraham, should carry out. The very next day he would put in his oar, and see if he could not distance that reprobate Clive, who, he felt convinced, was not worthy to receive the radiant smiles which played round that rosy mouth, or the arch, fond looks from those loving hazel eyes.

Georgie was in Paris, and, accordingly, in her train had followed Sir Henry Wilbraham. From Ninon de l'Enclos, down to the meanest flower-girl, every woman is more or less constitutionally a flirt ; and Georgie had received a tolerably large share of coquetry as her heritage. Since Clive's defection, she had held out a hand to Sir Henry Wilbraham. There was something about his practical yet tender wooing which not a little charmed her ; and without dreaming of inflicting a permanent wound, she had of late allowed him to foster a greater hope of one day winning her than she had ever done during those Summer rambles at Brinck Hall. The evening after that on which he had so unexpectedly seen Clive, he called, as usual, at Lady Ida's during her hours for receiving. As was frequently the case, the room was crowded

with visitors, for Lady Ida's sobriquet of *femme savante* had followed her to Paris; and here too she had a little court of struggling *literati*. Georgie was in one of her most sparkling moods. She delighted in Paris; gloried in the shops; and prattled endless little nothings in her fluent, ungrammatical French, to bowing Frenchmen, who were dazzled by her fair English beauty. Altogether, ever since she had been in France, she had been in such a state of what she called 'delicious excitement,' that Sir Henry must have had great confidence in his own powers as a 'woman-breaker,' when he entertained a thought of taming that wild, freedom-loving nature.

'Now let my tongue have its liberty, and talk English,' she exclaimed, as they shook hands. 'I have been trying to do that French twang with the high note till my throat is sore; and I have been listening to mamma's strictures on the natural development of animals with that spectacted female, who is a perfect Cuvier in petticoats, till I am nearly paralyzed with laughing; so now, Sir Henry, let us have some English sense.'

'With all my heart, my dear Miss Trant, though it is a commodity you do not usually care to deal very largely in.'

'Now, Sir Henry, I won't be chaffed. Frenchmen never chaff me—they are all devotion. Goodness! how nice it is to be worshipped! I think I shall marry a Frenchman.'

'No, Miss Trant, you will not—you know you will not,' and he looked grave and earnest.

'You don't know anything about it, Sir Henry, save that I am bound to give my hand where my heart suggests, and that you are bound to stand my friend, if my heart should turn out an imprudent counsellor. That was the compact, I think.'

'It was,' he murmured, half reluctantly.

'How delightful!—how novel, too, to have a friend who swears to stand by you, and give no advice, but tell your own natural instincts to follow their promptings. Sir Henry, you are one in a thousand!'

'I don't think I promised never to give any advice,' he said, half smiling, though these words were as gall and wormwood to him.

'Oh, yes, you did; but I see you are in a wrangling humour. I wish you would not come to see me when you

feel disagreeable and cantankerous. I shall go back to my Frenchmen ; they are much better fun. When you have collected your ideas, and left the azure demons to fight the battle of horrors without you, you will find me in the little drawing-room.'

And Georgie laughed a saucy laugh out of her bright eyes, and left Sir Henry in a subdued state, looking very grave, almost stern, as he leant, in true masculine fashion, against the door-post. And he had not said one word which could lead Georgie to think how ardently he wished to carry her out of this excitable, independent life of hers, to undergo the taming process down in that quiet humdrum Hampshire Hall. Sir Henry stood for some time in the same attitude, watching in a sort of dream the incongruous group of petty *litterati* assembled round Lady Ida's chair, his thoughts far off the while, when, on a sudden, a great commotion seems to have arisen in the little drawing-room. He hears water asked for as he passes rapidly through the door. Thrown back in an arm chair he sees Georgie ; the bright colour has faded from her cheeks, the light from her pretty eyes ; her hands are tightened rigidly in her lap ; she pays no heed to the chatterings and suggestions which are going on round her.

'Georgie,' said Sir Henry, calling her gently by her name, 'what has happened ?—are you ill ?'

She held her hand out to him, and opened her closed eyes.

'Take me away,' she said—'let me think it out alone.'

The man's face was as white as the girl's, for he felt the joy was passing out of his life ; but he raised her from her seat.

'Not to mamma,' she whispered softly ; let me go alone. No one can help me now.'

He guided her tottering steps across the corridor, where, with a pressure of the hand, but without a spoken word, she passed into an inner room ; and he, dragging his hat well down over his brows, strode forth into the darkness of the silent deserted street. What had passed to make Georgie—the bright, careless Georgie—fold those gauzy little wings of hers, and sink crushed and beaten to the ground, he could not divine ; but that Clive was connected in some mysterious way with the sudden change which had come over her he

felt very sure ; and a bitter expletive lingered on his lips as, regardless as to whither he went, he strode rapidly on. Presently he stopped.

‘I will sift this matter, though it cost me my life,’ he said to himself, as he turned back towards the more fashionable part of Paris, which he had almost left behind during his angry walk. A short quarter of an hour, however, brought him to a brilliantly-lighted café on the Boulevards, at which he knew more than one of his friends was likely to be found at this hour of the evening. He had scarcely crossed the threshold of the entrance door, when he was hailed with—

‘By Jove, Wilbraham, you are the very man I want! How are you, old fellow? I see there is a storm brewing in your eyes, but wait a bit before you explode.’

‘Earlsfort! Why, where have you sprung from?’

‘Ah, you may well ask. I got sick of the monotony of town life. Things went wrongish, if you must know the truth. I was disgusted with myself and everybody else ; so, without a word to mortal man, I started off to pay the Mormons a visit. The desire to see those regions has long been a craze of mine. Anyhow, I am cured of my dyspepsia, and here I am again, in the most civilised city in the world.’

‘Bar one.’

‘Bar none ; why, Hal, you don’t mean to say you are such a bigot as to think your own capital more civilised than Paris under the Empire? Why, there is not an Englishman living who knows what refinement or the enjoyment of life means till he has crossed the herring-pond, and received a little instruction. But never mind that just now ; look here, old boy, I only got your letter this morning, dated weeks ago, asking me to find out something about a certain man yclept Clive. Not a difficult mission as it proves now, for the whole quarter seems ablaze about him.’

‘About Clive?—why, what of him?’

‘My dear, good Wilbraham, it is so like you to be in Paris for weeks and know nothing of what is going on.’

‘I have never even heard the fellow mentioned since I have been here.’

‘Then all I can say is, you must either be very deaf or very weak at understanding the *parlez-vous*, for during the last six hours, which is the extent of time I have been in Paris, I have heard of no one else.’

‘I saw him last night going into a queer dark house in a back slum.’

‘I have no doubt you did; and if you had kept your ears open all day, you might have heard what he did when he got there.’

‘For Heaven’s sake tell me!—what does all this mean?’ said Sir Henry, earnestly.

‘Holla!—by Jingo, this grows interesting! Is he your half-brother, or first cousin, or some near relation, by chance; or why the devil do you of all men excite yourself thus?’

‘Do be serious, Earlsfort, if only for a moment, and tell me, like a sensible fellow, what you know about this man.’

‘Why, that he is a d——d swindler! And now you have the history of him in plain English.’

‘I always doubted him—I always doubted him!’ muttered Sir Henry between his teeth.

‘You have not been lending him money—eh, Wilbraham? You look very white and generally queer, as if you had been let in for something.’

‘No, no, it is not that. I have had no personal transactions with him. It is solely on account of another that I am interested in this matter. I wish to Heaven I had found him out before!’

‘Well, so you would, if I had not had a Mormon fever. Trust me for getting to the bottom of a queer business. I believe I ought to have been born a ferret. When I am quite hard-up—I am getting devilish near it now!—I shall either turn detective officer or lawyer’s clerk.’

‘It was the knowledge of your proclivities which made me write to you for information; but now you have not told me in what way this brute has been making himself notorious.’

‘Marked cards—that is his little game. He was suspected last night, so to-night they laid a trap for him, and detected him most unmistakeably. It was intended to have handed my fine fellow over to the police, but you see it could not be done without the proprietors of that respectable retreat being blown upon. They cut up rusty at the eleventh hour, the whole thing was muckered, and the gentleman escaped. Villemar is in there, gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth like a lunatic. He has been victimized to a pretty considerable amount.’

‘I have not much pity for men who are such fools as to

risk their money at cards. But where is Baron Villemar?— I should like to hear what he has to say about it.’

So the two men went into the large room together. An unusual amount of excitement seemed to prevail; a great deal of angry jabber was going on, and many a fierce oath tacked on to the name of Clive was hissing red-hot about the room. In the Babel which prevailed, Sir Henry did not learn much more than he already knew, save that he discovered that the tide of public opinion was turned with full force against the miscreant Clive, who did not seem to have a single friend in the whole assembly. In fact, Englishmen generally came in for a share of bad language, and Sir Henry, as a comparative stranger in Paris, might have found it somewhat difficult to hold his own, had he not had a first-rate backer in the person of the genial, cheery Earlsfort, who for some years had made Paris his Winter quarters, and was well known and liked by all the sporting spirits who were the *habitués* of this particular café. However, they speedily discovered that Sir Henry by no means sided with this cheating Englishman, who had just slipped through their fingers—a proceeding which enraged them perhaps more thoroughly than did his actual delinquencies.

It was apparent to them all that, for some reason, Sir Henry was as ready to hunt Clive to the death as they could any of them be, and he at once volunteered his services in the cause. The Baron Villemar drew him apart from the others, and gave him a full account of all that had happened, from the time the unfair play was first suspected to the moment when Clive was charged with wilfully defrauding his associates. In the scuffle and almost hand-to-hand fight which ensued, the lights, it seemed, were extinguished, and thus he got off scathless for the time, at least.

Then did Sir Henry first hear of that dark suspicion concerning Ralph Baird’s fate, which hung over this man, without anyone as yet having made the slightest effort to clear it up. Villemar’s own past life would not bear close retrospection, and he probably would not have referred to this mysterious tale which had come to his knowledge at Spa, when he and Clive and Madame d’Aubigné had met there in the months gone by, but he was exasperated at being ‘done,’ by an old associate, too, in gambling matters; and, writhing under his

vexation and annoyance, he confided more than he would otherwise have done to Sir Henry Wilbraham.

And this was the man on whom Georgie had bestowed her brightest smiles, and for whose sake, not an hour since, he had seen the colour fade out of her cheeks, and a cold leaden look of agony usurp the place of her wonted merry lightsomeness. And Sir Henry shuddered as he pictured to himself Georgie—his Georgie—in this man's clutches! She must be saved at every hazard. Clive, at the least, must be hunted out of Paris. So he gave the French Baron a promise to help him, and the two sallied forth together to track Clive, if possible, to his resting-place, and then to give him up to the mercies of French justice.





CHAPTER XIV.

SAVED AND LOST.

THE iron tongue of midnight had tolled twelve,' and gradually the inmates of the hotel in which Lady Ida Trant and Georgie had taken up their temporary quarters, while in Paris, were subsiding into tranquillity. That is to say, quietness by comparison with the constant traffic of the day, for in a large hotel busy life never seems altogether to settle down into a state of slumberous repose. Slowly up the stairs, wrapped in his large cloak, and with his hat drawn well down over his eyes, might be seen toiling the same man Sir Henry Wilbraham had not failed to recognise on the previous evening. To watch him, you would think that Oswald Clive had either been overtaken by some distressing bodily ailment, or that some severe mental torture had sapped all his vital energy, so utterly purposeless and dejected was his mien, as with feeble steps he crawled up the wide staircase. At last he reached his room, and tossing his hat and cloak to the farther side of it, threw himself heavily on the sofa. An oath, and none of the mildest, was jerked from between his half-closed teeth, into that unseen region from which we are told they will all eventually return, to plague those of whose evil brains they were begot. But Oswald Clive was past either caring for or thinking of the future. The present was weighing him down with a crushing weight. The same despairing, hunted look was in his eyes which they wore on that quiet grey morning when he bade Mathilde farewell. A new evil had befallen him—a new phase in that wretchedness which is so frequently of human carving had overtaken him. He pours out, with an unsteady hand, a glass of man's never-failing cordial—brandy. A chill either of mind or

body is upon him, for he shivers from head to foot. For a while the alcohol seem to calm the fibrous pulsation in that athlete form ; but it does not take the weary look from his eyes, nor the dark, impenetrable gloom from his brow.

'It must end !—it must !—by Heaven, it shall !' And he starts suddenly to his feet.

At the farther corner of the room there is a small mahogany case. He searches in his pocket for keys ; with fumbling hands he draws them out, and with some difficulty finding the right one, puts it to the lock. Then the same tremor comes over him, and large dew-drops of cold sweat stand on his pallid brow. He wipes them off with a feeble hand, and pours more brandy down his parched, clogged throat. Then he throws aside the case, and gazes with a sort of sickly smile on those dainty little firearms, as they lie there, waiting to do their deadly work.

'*Meurs, tu n'es qu'un méchant !*' he repeats slowly to himself, remembering Mathilde's words, as he takes one of these last new inventions in life-destroyers in his hand, and examines it with a critical eye. He pours out another glass of the stimulating fire which is to nerve him to face—what ! But that question he does not attempt to answer. The glass and the pistol, however, are replaced on the table with a sudden jerk, for two or three distinct raps at the door of the room have startled Clive back from the threshold of eternity. He answers not, but drops, half-unconscious, on the sofa. His overwrought mind had lost its reasoning power, and he fancies that the spirits from another world are bidding him pause ere he seeks the shades of Erebus. But again the knocking is repeated, and this time the appalled and shaking man bids his nocturnal visitor to enter. The nervous tension at which he had arrived quite forbade him to imagine that anything of flesh-and-blood was likely to appear ; and when the door did slowly open, and a head was thrust half-shyly into the room, 'Not in that form ! Heavens !—spare me ! spare me !' he moaned forth in agonizing tones, as he covered his face with his hands, and rolled round on the sofa, with his back turned to the intruder.

'Mr. Clive—Oswald—you are ill !' And Georgie walked quickly across the room, and laid her young, soft hand on his damp, clammy brow. Then he turned and looked at her with a fierce glare.

‘I shall go mad, I know I shall!’ he said. ‘Why have you come here? In another hour you would have been too late. Is hell so full of pleasures that the spirits of those I love are sent to torment me while on earth?’

‘Spirits, nonsense! What are you talking about? It is Georgie—a real flesh-and-blood Georgie, who has come to look after you—no spirit. You are ill, or have been sleeping and dreaming, poor dear; you shall not be worried any more.’

He sprang up and looked at her aghast.

‘Georgie, really Georgie, and no ghost!’ Then kneeling at her feet he kissed her hands wildly. ‘My darling—my darling!’ he cried, ‘thank Heaven for the good deed it has led you to do to-night,’ and he pointed to the open pistol-case.

Georgie shuddered and grew pale.

‘You will help me to live,’ he continued; ‘you will not leave me again to my evil thoughts. Georgie, love, you will be my guardian angel?’

The shivering horrors of despair had passed away now, and were succeeded by an excitement and a wild manner which almost frightened Georgie, plucky though she was, and accustomed to Clive’s passionate outbursts. Although Georgie had never paused to consider the decorum of the step, when she resolved to seek Clive out and have an interview with him ere she slept, yet this strange behaviour, which savoured more of madness than of sanity, was not quite what she had bargained for when, with her usual disregard for all conventionality, she had started off to learn from Oswald Clive himself the truth of some strange story she had heard. With womanly instinct she sought to sooth his wild raving, as she purred over him with her gentle voice and touch, and begged him to come and sit quietly down and tell her all about it. And he suffered himself to be led to a seat, but insisted on holding tightly Georgie’s hands in his. He seemed to fear, unless he held her fast, that she might ‘sink in earth or melt in air.’

‘Where have you come from, tell me?’ he asked at length, after they had sat looking at each other for some time in silence. Cast forth to wander on the earth alone, ‘with bloodhounds on his track like a hunted beast,’ he was hungry and thirsty for pity and for love. And the sight of Georgie, her merry eyes, melting into tenderness

out of pure compassion for and interest in him, woke up his dormant energies ; and instead of the apathy of despair, love and passion were once more aglow within him. But all this re-action almost frightened the poor little wilful girl. Yet of her own free-will she had walked into his lair, and she would not turn back now, so she nestled close to his side, with a tenderness which was new to Georgie, as she whispered,

‘Dear Oswald, don’t look so wild and strange, as if you were going to eat me. You quite frighten me with that hungry look.’

He bent over her and kissed her brow.

‘I have had much to excite me, my darling, but I would not harm you for worlds.’

‘I know it—I know all about it,’ she said, hurriedly, ‘and therefore am I here.’

‘You know it, Georgie—you know of what I am accused, and yet you have sought me out!’

‘It is not true, Oswald—it is not true?’

He made no answer, but glared at her wildly, and something like a sob burst from his lips ; she shivered as it fell on her ear, then she looked up at him with her clear true eyes.

‘Speak,’ she said in a voice so low that it was barely audible ; ‘tell me you did not kill that boy?’

He almost shook her from him, so vehemently did he start.

‘Heavens ! Georgie, you have believed that?’

‘No, Oswald, no. I have not. You are innocent, I know you are, oh ! my own, my own ! These hands are free from blood, I know—I feel they are !’ and she fell to kissing them with warm soft kisses.

But Oswald stopped her, and holding her at a short distance from him, looked at her fixedly.

‘I have committed no murder,’ he said, with forced calmness. ‘Will you believe this, Georgie, on my oath? But——’

‘Yes, yes,’ she murmured ; ‘I do believe it.’

‘But I have crimes and sins which hunt me down, and follow me about, and which, perhaps, in themselves are as heinous and as black.’

‘Oh ! I care not—I care not !’ she said. ‘I came here

to share them. Only before that one name of murderer did I quail ; but, Oswald darling, I felt it was not true.'

'And you have really come here to offer to share my misery and wretchedness?' asked Oswald.

'The three months you gave me for consideration are up to-day. I am ready to share your sunshine and your cloud—to be your true and loving wife.'

'All cloud, no sunshine, Georgie. Void and lone as is my life, I cannot ask you to participate in its endless gloom. It has thickened visibly during the last three months.'

She pointed to the open pistol-case.

'Better to share your miseries, and brighten them, if possible, than leave you alone to end them thus. Could I ever smile again, knowing such had been your fate, and I might have averted it?'

'You will not smile in the hard life you would fain share with me, my darling.'

'Never mind ; then we will grumble and weep together. Look here, Oswald,' and there was a dash of Georgie's old petulance, 'I am very wilful, very spoiled, and fond of having my own way, and I am determined to take care of you ; so, whether you like it or not, you are in for it, and had better submit quietly. I don't care for mother or friends, or any one else in the world ; when I *will* do a thing I do it, and there is an end of it.'

He drew her gently towards him, and kissed her tenderly.

'Against my reason I give in,' he said. 'May you never repent this night's work, my Georgie, though I fear—I fear you will. What, too, is to be done? I must leave Paris to-morrow.'

'I will go with you,' she said, pointing once more to the pistols. 'After that madness, sir, you are not to be trusted alone.'

'Can you have such belief—such faith in me? This is past credence.'

'Pooh ! you men talk a vast deal of nonsense about women's vows being traced in sand, but you none of you know anything at all about the matter,' and the saucy expression came back to her eyes as she looked pertly at her companion. He smiled on her as he asked—

'Now tell me how you come here, like an angel from heaven, in this unexpected fashion. I had no idea you were in Paris.'

'Nor I that you were, until about three hours ago, though it seems that little fool Josette has known for some days that you were in this hotel. You do not deserve the interest I take in your welfare, considering the way you left England without one word to poor little me, though you had sworn great big oaths, just like a man, that you would write so often.'

'I could not help it, darling—I had hoped to spare you.'

'Spare me!—spare yourself, you mean, the pain of telling me a few unpleasant truths, which I have had to hear from strangers' lips. Or perhaps you thought, Mr. Clive, that when I knew all I should turn and kiss my hand to you from the top of some high pinnacle. Oh, fie!'

'When you knew all! What do you know, and how?' and the hunted, weary look came back to the eyes which gazed on Georgie.

She paused and bent her head.

'Speak, Georgie, speak,' and he shook her hand almost roughly in his eagerness—'what do you know?'

'That you are suspected of unfair play at cards, and also of having had a hand in the disappearance of young Baird. That it is not safe for you to stay twenty-four hours longer in Paris, as a certain Baron de Villemar is on your track, infuriated at something which took place last night over your play.'

'You have heard this, and are here now!'

'Yes; I heard two Frenchmen talking of you in mamma's drawing-room to-night, so I came here to warn you, and to save you. Assure me once more that that boy lives, or that you are in no way responsible for his death, and then shut up that nasty pistol-case, and let us make arrangements for leaving Paris at once.'

'Ralph Baird's death lies not at my door,' said Oswald, gloomily. 'Ask Mathilde d'Aubigné where is he.'

'Madame d'Aubigné! you know that woman? Oh, Oswald!' cried Georgie, with a sort of plaintive wail, 'now may I believe in prescience! I felt she was to be the evil genius of my life.'

'Did she seek you out, my pet? Poor Mathilde, she promised me she would learn to love you for my sake.'

'I hate her! I hate her!' cried Georgie; 'she is a wily, deceitful woman. She told me lies—lies—pretended she

knew nothing of you or of your doings. To my life's end I shall hate that woman !'

'Hush, hush, my darling ! She shall not harm you ; as my wife you will be safe from her, at least. But oh ! Georgie, think again. Pause and consider what a load of wretchedness you are heaping up for yourself ; what days of hardship, anxiety, and penury you will have to endure if you become a sharer in my life. It is not yet too late to repent. This night's meeting can be kept a secret. Slip back quietly to your room, and forget that Oswald Clive burdens the earth with his unlucky presence.'

'In plain English, leave you here to blow your brains out ! No, sir, we have done with that nonsense for ever, and henceforth are going to lead a very practical, matter-of-fact life. But now, look here, it is nearly two o'clock, and we have come to no conclusive arrangements. Will you shut that nasty pistol-case ; it makes me shudder to look at it, and I am afraid to close it myself.'

And then they talked over their future plans, and decided how they could best avoid the vigilance of Clive's pursuers and Georgie's friends, if they should once become acquainted with the fact of her interview with this *vaurien* gambler. At last they parted for a few hours—Georgie, although in terror for her life, carrying with her the dreaded pistol-case. Oswald Clive should never see those pistols again ; he had forfeited them for ever by his rashness.

She passed quickly out of Clive's room, begging him to remain inside to avoid observation. So quickly did she pass on, that she nearly fell into the arms of a man who was coming round a sharp angle of the corridor, in the now dimly-lighted house.

An exclamation fell from his lips, which made Georgie look up, and to her no small dismay she found herself face to face with Sir Henry Wilbraham !





CHAPTER XV.

LOVE VERSUS REASON.

SIR Henry Wilbraham's look of intense surprise at meeting Georgie on the hotel stairs in the middle of the night instantly reminded her of how fatal any slip of hers might be to the cause she had in hand, and her presence of mind did not desert her for an instant.

'Where are you going at this hour, Miss Trant?' he asked.

'To bed,' was the ready answer ; 'and you, Sir Henry? I did not know that saints like you participated in the gay doings of this naughty capital till the small hours of the morning.'

'Where I have been matters little—but you, Georgie, I do not understand this.'

'It is not necessary that you should ; but since you are so very inquisitive, I have been having a woman's gossip with a friend. Is there anything so very wonderful in that?'

'I did not know you had any friends in Paris.'

'Did you not? Then, you see, you live and learn. And now, as I am very sleepy, perhaps you will put off the rest of this cross-examination till to-morrow morning.'

'May I come and see you early? I have much to say to you.'

'Not too early : I shall not be up. By-the-way, it just occurs to me that you are not staying in this hotel. For what mysterious reasons are you skulking about these passages?'

'Clive is here.'

‘Is he? And pray what has that to do with you?’

‘It is of him I would have talked to you to-morrow. I have heard things of him to-night which render it necessary you should be told he is no fit associate for you.’

‘Well, I know all about it. Those two French dandies were quite as explicit as you are likely to be. But that does not explain what brings you here now.’

‘Such vagabonds should be given up to justice!’ muttered Sir Henry.

‘And you have come here in the capacity of a midnight policeman? Most creditable! Allow me to congratulate you on the sanctity which covers so much charity. I always thought to tend and succour the unfortunate was the first duty of a Christian—not to hunt them down and yield them up to justice.’

‘The unfortunate, yes, but not a cheat, a swindler—nay worse, perhaps a—’

‘Hush, Sir Henry! “Let him who has no sin among you cast the first stone.” Do you feel sure that, when your summons for Eternity shall come, you will enter the presence of your Judge perfectly pure and spotless, and untainted by a single mortal sin?’

‘No, no,’ said Sir Henry. ‘How can you ask such questions?’

‘Then, not knowing what you may be tempted some day to do yourself, do not make your own condemnation heavier by judging hardly of another, and unnecessarily interfering in his punishment.’

‘Georgie, you are eloquent to-night.’

‘Yes, Sir Henry; and, what is more, you shall not go from here till my eloquence has had the desired effect. Mr. Clive and I have spent some very jolly hours together. I like him, though you say he is a scamp. Granted he may be; but, for old recollections’ sake, I mean to free him from your persecutions. So now promise me that you will go home to bed, and let the French barons fight their own battles, without any effort being made on your part to help them.’

Sir Henry seemed by no means inclined to give the desired promise, but began to contend the point. Georgie stamped her little foot—

‘You like me—even pretend to love me—Sir Henry, and

you will not make even this small concession to please me. Say, do you wish us to be friends?’

‘With my whole heart!’ he said.

‘Then I swear to you, with my whole heart, that I will never speak to you again if you raise your little finger even against Mr. Clive. You have made me quite melodramatic, but, nevertheless, I mean what I say. If you obey me in this, well, there is no saying what blessings I may bestow on you in the future.’

‘I suppose I must give in.’

‘Of course you must. Promise—swear!’

‘I promise,’ said Sir Henry, gloomily.

‘Well, I suppose a saint’s promise equals a sinner’s oath.’

‘May I come and see you in the morning?’

‘About one o’clock, yes, if you like.’

And Georgie sped on her way, and hid the case of pistols under her bed, ere she made her hasty preparations for an early flight.

‘Saved him for the second time to-night. Oh! Oswald, if I am always to be allowed to arrive just in the very nick of time to stave away a misadventure, what a happy little woman I shall be!’

And Sir Henry turned slowly to leave the hotel, into which, after some hours of trouble, he had just traced Clive. Disappointed though he was in the pursuit of his victim, he was not altogether displeased. Georgie, he thought, at last saw Clive’s faults in their true light, and that was the only object he cared to attain. She was evidently anxious to save him from trouble; but she evinced more of the interest usually shown for a mere passing acquaintance than the deep passion which would mark a loving woman’s words when the man who was her all in life was in imminent danger.

Thus thought Sir Henry. As we know, he was one of those good, worthy, well-meaning people who, with very little real knowledge and appreciation of the characteristic differences in human nature, frequently erred from very ignorance. The interesting but difficult study of the delicate touches and tiny intricacies by which the Almighty has made men’s characters as various as their forms and features, was to him a closed book. Alas! how prone are we all to judge each other hardly because we measure by our own standard of what is right and wrong without studying the effect the

same series of circumstances would be likely to have on nature which has been attuned to another key, and which though it may ring as true, is totally at variance and discordant with our own.

When Sir Henry reached the outer door of the hotel two men eagerly advanced to meet him. They were the Baron de Villemar and Dick Earlsfort. It was still dark, and they must have noticed the deadly paleness of his face, and the hesitating twitch of his mouth as he gave utterance to the one syllable, 'Gone.'

A well known word, with some strongly-developed 'r' hissed from behind the Frenchman's moustache; while Earlsfort cried out,

'Gone!—impossible! The evidence was so clear that he came here. The door-keeper saw him enter only a few hours since. How the devil has he got out?'

'I don't know,' said Sir Henry, hurriedly; 'but I am very weary with the search. Let us have a few hours' sleep. The morning light may prove more successful than the darkness.'

'Have you seen a ghost, man, or what has happened to you in that hotel? Why, all the fire has gone out of you. You were more desperate in pursuit than any of us half a hour ago.'

'I am tired, I tell you,' answered Sir Henry, with a irritability very unusual to him. 'What is the use of cavilling with a weary man? I am annoyed, too, I suppose at being balked of my prey.'

'Well, it is all one to me. Let us liquor up and turn in, if that is the order given. Villemar, do you agree?'

The Baron growled an assent, to the effect that after a revenge would not restore him the money of which he had been defrauded; and so the three men sauntered off together, totally unconscious of the soft hazel eyes which from an open window on the first floor were peering through the darkness to watch, if possible, their retreating forms, or of the little white hands which were clapped so joyfully when at last they did really depart, and the coast was left free for another venture.

It is well said that 'it is impossible to love and be wise' and Sir Henry, stolid and practical as by nature he was, had certainly allowed his wisdom to give place to his love.

When, after parting with his two companions, he sat down to reason with himself and go over in memory the adventures of the night, there was a sense of dissatisfaction at the share he had had in them, which made him very restless and unhappy. When Sir Henry gave a promise to Georgie that Clive should be safe from him, he had defied all his powers of reasoning and wisdom. He had forgotten, too, that to carry his purpose into execution, he must invent some excuse to the two men who were waiting in the street till he should have discovered whether Clive was really in the hotel or not. They would have laughed him to scorn had he acknowledged that a pair of bright eyes had crossed his path and turned him from his purpose, so the ready lie rose to his lips.

And now, as Sir Henry Wilbraham, strict religionist as he was, passed his conscience in review, in the secret communings of his chamber, he felt humbled in his own sight.

Come of an old Puritan stock, much of his ancestors' rigidity in matters of faith, and a strong desire to adhere closely to the paths of truth and justice, had descended to him, and he was covered with shame at his own falseness. Montaigne says : ' If it be well weighed, to say a man lieth, is as much as to say he is brave towards God, and a coward towards men ; for a lie faces God and shrinks from man.' And so it was with Sir Henry—for bitterly as he regretted the sin he had committed before God, yet the fear that his friends would discover the share he had had in Clive's escape weighed on his mind yet more heavily. He could not bear to think that in the future he might be a by-word amongst his set for having betrayed their confidence, and that the lie he had rashly uttered for Georgie's sake would be bandied from lip to lip with a sneer whenever his name was mentioned.

As he lay tossing about in the dark, he began to think, too, that he had risked his reputation in a very unwise cause. He turned over in his mind every word Georgie had uttered, till, what at the time he had ascribed merely to a passing interest in an old flirt, he now magnified into the deepest affection and regard.

How slowly did the hours pass away till one o'clock, when he had permission to seek Georgie's presence ! And when the time had nearly arrived, what a haggard, eager look was

in Sir Henry's face as he strolled through the streets in the direction of the hotel. It wanted but a few minutes of one when he entered. He was met at the door by Lady Ida's servant, who informed him that he was just coming in search of him, as Lady Ida wished to speak to him without delay. A chill crept over Sir Henry's heart at these words. That some terrible thing had befallen, he felt very sure. He sped up the stairs with breathless haste, and dashed unceremoniously into Lady Ida's sitting-room.

She was sitting crouched over a miserable wood fire, rocking herself backwards and forwards, and moaning piteously. She caught Sir Henry convulsively by both hands.

'Pity me—help me!' she said; 'what shall I do without her?—she is gone!' and Lady Ida burst into tears.

'Gone! Who?—where?' Lady Ida, do speak clearly. I do not understand.'

'Georgie!—Georgie!' she cried. Oh! what shall I do?'

'Georgie! you do not mean—she is not?'—he gasped out, articulating with difficulty.

'Yes, yes, she has gone off with Mr. Clive.'

Sir Henry sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

'Better, far better she were dead! Oh, Heavens! to think I might have averted this!' And writhing in mental agony, he sobbed like a very child.

'I sent for you to help me, and you are more overcome than I am!' at last whined Lady Ida. 'Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do? That tiresome, foolish child! she will be starved to death. I am sure I have no money to give her. Why did you not marry her yourself, Sir Henry? I always thought you would.'

'She never cared for me—she always preferred that fellow Clive,' said Sir Henry, mournfully.

'Nonsense; she would have liked you very well, if you had been a little less severe and staid with her. Oh, dear! I am sure I wish you had.'

This was heaping coals of fire on Sir Henry's head with a vengeance. He could say nothing, and sat speechless, gazing into vacancy. Had the mother known how easily last night he might have saved poor Georgie from her fate,

but how she herself had tempted him from his duty, she might with justice have upbraided him, he thought.

But Lady Ida, he found, was in total ignorance of the dark cloud which hung over Clive. It was only over his want of money that she wailed, regretting that her darling would in future be bereft of the little delicacies and luxuries which had hitherto been a part of her life.

‘Well were it if she obtained the common necessities,’ thought Sir Henry, ruefully.

He sat for some time, partly listening to the mother’s maunderings, but chiefly dwelling with a remorse which oppressed him till it almost became a stupor, on his own share in this sad business. Presently a new light seemed to break on him, and in a moment he was on his feet, looking about in a sort of hopeless maze for his hat.

‘What is the matter, Sir Henry? You are not going to leave me? I cannot bear to be alone. Where are you going?’

‘To England.’

‘All in this hurry! How unkind to desert me in my trouble! Can’t you wait, and take me home? I shall be quite lost without Georgie.’ And the poor old lady began to cry again.

All her would-be cleverness and smattering of learning were as nothing now; and there was a helplessness about her sorrow which provoked Sir Henry.

‘If she had not been such a drivelling fool,’ he thought, ‘with her literary cliques, musical *réunions*, pet schemes, and sundry other follies, all this mischief might have been spared. People should not have daughters if they cannot make up their minds to look after them.’

So he answered her somewhat roughly,

‘My dear Lady Ida, grieved to the heart as I am over what has happened, yet I cannot quite forget that there is a duty to be performed—I must follow this unhappy girl.’

‘Oh! bring her back!—bring her back, Sir Henry!’ cried the mother, seizing this new idea. ‘You will; and then perhaps she will marry you after all.’

‘Lady Ida, this is impossible!’ And a dark scowl gathered on the Baronet’s brow. ‘I have no intention of bringing Georgie back. It is too late, I fear, for that. They

started at five o'clock, you say, now it is nearly two. You should have sent for me hours ago.'

'I have only just known of it myself. No one told me anything till I came in to breakfast about twelve o'clock, and found my pretty bright Georgie gone. But if you are not going to bring her back, what are you going to England for, Sir Henry?'

'To see if that vile scamp has really married her. I may be days before I trace them. You had better come to London with your maid. It is useless to stop here by yourself, I should think; and it would be worse than useless for me to remain while there is work to be done.'

So he left her, and strode off with rapid steps to another hotel close by. Earlsfort was standing smoking at the door.

'Hal Wilbraham!' he exclaimed—'Why, what the devil—'

'Hush! man. Will you come with me to England by the next train?'

'To the world's end, if you like—that is to say, if there be an adventure in the wind. Only don't be so deuced mysterious—tell a fellow what is up. You look devilish comical—as if you had been struck by lightning or something.'

'I wish to follow Clive; and I cannot trust myself alone!'

'Poor beast!—let him go—don't be so cursed blood-thirsty, Hal!—it is not like you. He has done you no harm. Some of the London sharp ones will find him, and give him a trouncing, never fear.'

'Done me no harm, d—n him!'

'Strong language, by Jove! I thought it was a thing you objected to as a rule.'

'He has carried away with him the only woman for whom I ever cared, and who alone could make my life endurable.'

Earlsfort gave a low whistle.

'Now I understand a good deal which I must acknowledge mystified me not a little. What is the good of going after them, though? You would not take her now, even should you catch them; and, by Lucifer! she will have her punishment as that man's wife! You need not wish her anything worse.'

Sir Henry groaned.

'I would have the satisfaction of knowing that she is his wife. There is a step lower.'

'Humphrey, pack my portmanteau, and look sharp about it!' shouted Earlsfort to his servant, who happened to cross the hall just at that moment. Then he threw his cigar end into the street, and lighted another. 'Capricious animals, women! Now fancy any girl preferring that blackguard Clive to you!'

'*Chut!* I am in no mood for jesting,' answered Sir Henry, somewhat angrily.

'You will get over it, my dear fellow—you will get over it. Go and pay the Mormons a visit, as I did. I was as badly hit as you are only a few months back. Now I am sound heart and limb.'

'“Some heart-wounds never heal without a scar.”'

'So you think now, my good fellow—worst case on record, and all that sort of thing. Well, I must acknowledge it is a bad business. Who is the young lady who, with the weakness of her sex in general, has shown such a decided preference for a scamp?'

'Georgie Trant.'

'What, that bright little girl, daughter to the old maniac with the grizzly bob-curls, who thinks herself a walking encyclopædia? Well, I am sorry; she is far too good for the lot she has chosen.'

Sir Henry sighed heavily.

'Don't let us talk any more about the matter, but *en route*; the next train goes in half an hour. It is too bad to drag you to England, though, Dick. I daresay I can manage very well by myself.'

'Not a bit of it! I would not trust you for whole mines of Californian gold. You will be shooting the fellow through the head at the altar, or committing some equal piece of grotesqueness. I'll go with you, my boy. I will send Villemar a line before we start. I say, what about that missing boy story, Hal? Do you think there is any truth in it?'

Sir Henry answered with a shrug.

'I shall investigate Clive's proceedings no farther,' he said. 'To protect Georgie from harm as much as lies in my power will be my future effort. I once promised, whatever happened, I would stand her friend, and I intend to keep my word.'

‘By Jove! I knew you were not quite like other mortals but I did not give you credit for such an amount of sentimentality. Dangerous little game, though, as long as the aforesaid young woman usurps a prominent place in the machine that does duty for your heart. Well, come along, old boy; I see you are in no humour to stand chaff, so we will put it off for another time.’

‘If I could have borrowed some of your lightheartedness, Georgie might have been mine now,’ said Sir Henry, gloomily, as they went into the hotel together to make the necessary preparations for their journey.





CHAPTER XVI.

STARTLING INTELLIGENCE.

DRAYERS are just over, and the hoary-headed butler is fussily performing the important function of carrying the hissing silver urn into the well-appointed breakfast-room at Brinck Hall. Everything in that establishment is done with a punctuality which is, we venture to say, almost unequalled in any other house in England, and the massive hall clock tolls out nine deep-toned strokes as the breakfast is being placed on the table. The last sound had not died away, when Mathilde glided softly into the room, and walked up to the mistress of the house.

‘Pardon, madame, that I was not present at prayers, but I am a Catholic, you know, and as such must hope to be excused.’

The old lady, who was busying herself over the tea-making, looked up visibly embarrassed.

‘A Catholic! I was not aware—I should have asked. Dear, dear!’ she stuttered out, annoyed at having her prejudices interfered with, but imbued with too much innate good breeding willingly to wound the feelings of another.

‘Dear Lady Wilbraham, I am so sorry you did not know; but, as a Frenchwoman, it was but natural to suspect that such would be the case. However, I have seen too much of the world to be a bigot. We are all, I hope, struggling, though by different paths, for the Crown. I will promise never to mention the subject of religion to Miss Fane, and, notwithstanding our difference of faith, oh! I do hope we shall get on together—but I am so sorry, I wish you had known before I came.’

Lady Wilbraham laid her hand kindly on Mathilde’s shoulder.

‘Don’t distress yourself, my dear—it was a mistake, you could not help it. I trust that it will make no difference in our future relations : but I too am sorry.’

Mathilde a stickler for her religious principles !—she does indeed present herself in a new character. The truth is that, arriving at Brinck Hall about the middle of the previous day, she had not been many hours in the house before she discovered that her future companions were strong religionists and staunch Protestants, and that she would be expected to attend church twice, if not thrice, on Sundays, as well as prayers every morning and evening, and do a considerable amount of duty at the village-schools. Now, though Mathilde had been brought up in the Catholic faith, her views on the subject of religion were lax. Without professing any disbelief in the doctrines of the Christian church, she simply went on her easy way and did not trouble herself about them at all ; but when, to her dismay, she discovered the onerous duties this new life of hers would entail, she at once found a ready excuse for absenting herself by falling back on her Catholic profession. If it proved an impassable obstacle to her being domesticated at Brinck Hall—well, she could but look out for another home. Stay there to be dragooned into saying her prayers at Lady Wilbraham’s bidding was more than she could bear ; so the fight had better begin at once.

‘Do let me make the breakfast, dear Lady Wilbraham. Oh ! I am so unhappy ! I thought I had found such a happy home !—such kind friends ! Miss Fane, too, with her innocent, fresh beauty !—I was prepared to love her so intensely ! And then this miserable subject of religion has been overlooked, and I may have to go out in the lone, wide world again. You, dear lady, do not know what it is to be adrift in that great London, with no *entourage* of kindly faces or loving voices.’

‘My dear child, pray do not excite yourself thus—you quite agitate me. Ill-health has made me very nervous. There is no occasion for you to leave us at present, at all events. I am only too pleased to get such a ladylike, cultivated companion for Glory. I must own I wish we had been of one mind on religious subjects, and I am afraid my son may be annoyed at our having made the discovery so late ; but I hope he will not view it in a serious light.’

‘Good gracious! so the son is a Puritan! I have planted myself in a hornet’s nest!’ thought Mathilde. ‘Your son is absent on the Continent, is he not, madame? I trust I shall have proved to you ere he return that differences of opinion on religion need not part friends.’

‘My son returned very unexpectedly last night after we had all retired,’ answered Lady Wilbraham; ‘and, as I expect him momentarily to come in to breakfast, perhaps it will be as well to waive this subject for discussion till a later hour in the day.’

Mathilde bowed her head.

‘For my part, I should wish it to be talked of no more,’ she said, quietly, as the door opened, and Sir Henry Wilbraham and Glory, who had been taking a stroll in the garden, enjoying the beauty of an unusually fine November morning, walked into the room.

Mademoiselle la Fitte was formally introduced to the Baronet, and the impression made on both sides, as Sir Henry cordially shook this new inmate by the hand, and expressed a hope that she would find her residence with them a happy one, was decidedly favourable. There was a stern, reserved, almost melancholy expression about Sir Henry’s manly bearded face, with which Madame d’Aubigné was sure to be taken at once. With all her love—her devotion to Clive, it was, though perhaps she recognised it not, just that little weakness of character, of which old Jerome was so conscious, that had caused her passion for him to cool. But as she looked on the deep lines, the resolute thin lips, the clear eye of the man who had just seated himself opposite to her, she felt there was no want of character there—Sir Henry was determined, almost to obstinacy. Here was ground worth working; to discover whether his will or hers was the stronger, would afford her ample amusement during her country exile.

He looked very worn and dejected, and there was something very cheering to his depressed spirits about Mathilde’s rich beauty, and those large expressive eyes of hers, which seemed almost to overpower him as they gazed. Glory had been confiding to him that the new companion was very pretty, prettier than any one she had ever seen; but Sir Henry was still unprepared for so much beauty and grace, and for a few moments was fairly dazzled. Something within him made him wish that she had never come there. She was too

bright and dangerous-looking for their quiet home. Mischief might accrue : for himself he had no fear, his heart was filled with the image of another ; but Sir Henry was naturally a quiet man, and though he knocked about occasionally in the busy haunts of life, yet he would fain have kept Brinck Hall as a spot where he could retire with his quiet womankind when he was tired of the hurry of busy life. And this Frenchwoman was a being from another sphere, not the sort of woman he would have selected to fill the little chink in the home circle ; but there she was, and there he supposed for the present she must stay.

These were the thoughts which chased each other through Sir Henry's mind, in far less time than we have taken to describe them, as he looked across the table at the new-comer. The breakfast proceeded in something very like silence ; there was a restraint over the little party ; Sir Henry seemed very absent and disinclined for conversation, and Mathilde was not as yet sufficiently at home to feel herself authorised to speak first. At last Sir Henry somewhat abruptly addressed Lady Wilbraham.

'Mother, have you had any letters from Paris ? Do you know what has happened ?'

'No, dear Henry, I have heard nothing No evil to the Trants, I hope'

'Miss Trant has eloped with Clive.'

Well was it for Mathilde that the urn was between her and Sir Henry, or he could not have failed to notice the deadly pallor which in a moment took the place of her usually fresh bright colour.

'You do not mean it !' said Lady Wilbraham. 'How dreadful ! Poor Lady Ida, I always pitied her for having such a wilful, disobedient daughter. So they have eloped, have they ? Where have they gone ? Are they married ?'

'Yes,' answered Sir Henry, wearily, 'they are. I made it my business to prove that. By Jove ! if Clive had not married her, after wantonly and deliberately taking her away from her mother's care, knowing, too, that he was hunted almost to the death for sundry very flagrant offences, I would have horsewhipped him within an ace of his life in the public street, the first time I had the chance !'

'Poor Georgie, do you think she will be happy ?' asked Glory's little quiet voice.

‘Happy, no ; disobedience will bring its own reward, child. Happy with that man ! Oh, Georgie, Georgie !’ and Sir Henry covered his face with his hands and groaned, ‘and I might have saved her ! I met her in the corridor of the hotel about two hours before they started. I had been about with the police on Clive’s track, at the instance of a friend of mine, the Baron de Villemar ; and she implored, adjured, begged for him, till I could resist her no more, and, like an idiot that I was, to please her I consented to let him go, and thus gave them the opportunity to escape !’

Mathilde sat rigidly behind the urn ; her hands lay in her lap, pressed so tightly together that the blood oozed from the nail-prints. The colour came slowly back to her cheeks as she heard of Clive’s escape. Who had loved him best ?—this girl who was now his wife, or the woman who had risked her liberty, even her reputation, in that mysterious business at Spa ?

‘Where are they now ?’ asked Lady Wilbraham.

‘In London, I believe—at least, they were married in one of the City churches. I have not seen them. I came down here at once, after I ascertained that they were married. Of course, now he is poor Georgie’s husband, Clive is free from any interference on my part. Villemar must work his affairs himself ; and I do not think he will make much out of them now Clive is back in England. He is either very knowing, or very lucky, for I understand this is not the first time the police have been after him ; and he always manages to shirk them.’

‘Poor, poor Georgie ! this is sad. What has he done, Henry, to bring the police on his track ?’

Sir Henry groaned.

‘Better not ask, mother. I pray to heaven poor Georgie may never know !’

‘Oh ! this is shocking ! I feel quite upset. Shall we write to poor dear Lady Ida, and ask her to come here ?’

‘If you like, mother. But Lady Ida scarcely seems inclined to make a trouble of it. She does not see that rascal Clive in his true colours. Perhaps it is as well they none of them know the abyss of infamy into which he has sunk.’

Mathilde shivered from head to foot. She thought of the day when Georgie bravely defended Clive to Mrs. Baird, and she dared not speak one word in his vindication now.

‘Mademoiselle la Fitte, how you tremble !—how pale you are ! Are you ill ?’ cried Glory, who had looked round on hearing this movement on Mathilde’s part.

‘No, it’s nothing,’ she said, and she started at the sound of her own voice, so hollow were its tones.

‘Indeed you are not well. Come upstairs with me.’ And Glory threw her arm around her new companion, to lead her from the room.

‘My nervous system has had a shock lately ; and I believe I over-tired myself before I left London yesterday. Do not be alarmed—it will soon pass,’ exclaimed Mathilde, struggling for the mastery over herself ; but, nevertheless, very ready to escape with Glory from Sir Henry’s searching eyes, which were fixed very keenly on her.

‘I hope you made every enquiry about that French-woman before you introduced her here as Glory’s bosom-friend, mother ?’ he said, as the door closed upon them.

‘Yes, indeed ; and everything was most satisfactory. A very clever old lady gave her a most excellent testimonial. I felt myself too infirm to go to town to have an interview with her, so she has come for a month to see how we like each other. If I had known you would have returned so soon, I should have waited for you to see her.’

‘And mademoiselle would not have come to Brinck Hall,’ said Sir Henry, quietly.

‘What have you seen?—what do you know?’ was the mother’s nervous question.

‘Nothing, mother dear. Pray do not excite yourself. But the charge and care of a pretty woman is always more or less of a responsibility—a trouble with which I do not think you and I need have saddled ourselves.’

‘Oh ! is that all ?’ said the old lady, visibly relieved. ‘You are so very practical, my dear Henry. For my part I delight to look at a pretty face ; and this young French-woman’s beauty fascinates me. I am afraid you will be more prejudiced against her when I tell you something I only found out this morning. She is a Roman Catholic.’

‘Humph !’ said Sir Henry. ‘I do not particularly mind that. Glory has too much decision of character to be easily influenced ; and there are good and bad of all denominations. But there is a something about her I do not under-

stand ; and I cannot help saying I wish she had never come here.'

'Oh ! Henry, you quite frighten me. Let us send her away at once.'

'Mother, this is ridiculous ; we cannot dismiss her without a pretext, and she has given us none. You say she has come for a month. Well, let her stay, and by that time we shall see if there is any reason for doubting her.'

And so Mathilde's fate, for a time at least, was decided in a few words ; while she herself, battling the while with a fierce inward storm, which would not be allayed, was talking little quiet platitudes to Glory, about over-fatigue and the depressing state of the weather having had an unusual effect upon her nerves, which, she said, thank goodness, were generally strong enough. At last she persuaded the young girl that to leave her to herself would be the kindest thing she could do for her, assuring her that a quiet half-hour would quite re-establish her usual good health. So the door was closed, and Mathilde was left alone in the pretty bright room which had been allotted to her for her private sanctum, as long as she should remain a resident at Brinck Hall.

It was appointed in every way befitting a lady's boudoir : the furniture was gay, but in good taste ; rare flowers, considering the lateness of the season, had been arranged upon the table in a vase of singular shape—one of Sir Henry's foreign purchases—and a cheerful wood fire was burning in the grate.

Mathilde herself, with all her love of *bric-à-brac* and household gems, could scarcely have desired a prettier morning-room than the one she was now told to consider her own. The fact was, many of the scraps and bits which had accumulated from Sir Henry's frequent wanderings abroad had been congregated there ; for Lady Wilbraham, with the primitiveness which was one of her characteristics, objected to that portion of the house over which she reigned supreme being filled with 'gim-cracks and breakables.'

Lady Wilbraham was quite opposite in taste to Mathilde ; she loved stern simplicity. A thing must be useful, or it was worth nothing, was the leading idea which guided her. Thus, she could not see what a room required beyond chairs and tables, and the actual necessities of a simple, unluxurious life. Soft sofas, lounging-chairs, and the hundred other

luxuries with which modern invention has pampered man, were entirely tabooed by Lady Wilbraham. Sir Henry might have what he pleased in his den, but she expressed a hope that her rooms might remain untouched, with no alteration in the primitive old furniture which had been good enough for the Wilbrahams' ancestors in many a bygone generation.

So it came to pass that Mathilde's was the cheeriest and cosiest corner in the house. A pretty little bedroom opened out of it ; and if ever the disposition of an apartment gave a stranger a cordial welcome, Mathilde could not complain of hers. But, fully as she knew how to appreciate those million tiny atoms of beauty, which are as sunshine and warmth to some refined minds, at the present moment they were as naught before the overwhelming news which she had just heard. She threw herself on her knees on the hearth-rug, and buried her head in a large chair which stood beside her. Then came that gush of agonizing tears, which, to a strong, passionate nature like Mathilde's, is a sort of safety-valve, and frequently prevents some more desperate and dangerous resolve from being carried out. Rare indeed was it for her thus to give way, but she had scarcely been herself since she had been a witness to old Sternheim's state of helpless imbecility. Perhaps it was 'the small, still voice' which could not be silenced within her ; for, callous and heartless though Mathilde was, yet there is no man, or woman either, so utterly bad but that their sins sting them occasionally.

What a blessed monitor is conscience, sent by a compassionate, kind Providence ! But how frequently does it knock, ay, and loudly, too, at the door of man's heart in vain !

This new turn in the tide of affairs had indeed taken her by surprise. To have prevented this marriage would have been one of the dearest objects of her life—especially, too, since she had seen Georgie, and ascertained for herself that she was not quite that senseless doll she had imagined her to be. Where, now, would be her influence with Clive ? The power of her strong mind over his weaker one was the link which she had hoped would have bound them indissolubly together. How she cursed the hour when, trusting in her own fascinations to call him back when it suited her, she had bade him go and amuse himself for a while at his

pleasure! Now, that she felt he was lost to her, the old love came back with all its latent fire and force.

But as Mathilde lay there shaking with her own convulsive sobs, it were as well, perhaps, not to analyze too closely the evil passions which coursed each other rapidly through her brain. At last the storm seemed to spend itself, and, as when you gaze firmament-wards after the thunder-clouds have burst, the horizon looked somewhat clearer. The sobs became less frequent, and when she looked up, there was less of the fine rolling frenzy about her large eyes than when they startled that timid little fawn, Glory, with their wildness. She rose and looked at herself in a quaint mediæval mirror which had once adorned the walls of a Florentine palace.

‘And he has deserted me for her,’ she said, as she contemplated her own features. ‘That I should live to be thus slighted! What is the use of beauty? Is it the mere plaything of a man’s caprice? I wonder what that indefinable something is which has more power than beauty over the heart—that sort of mesmeric influence which alone can bind two natures? “*Simpatia*,” those silky southerners call it, but they don’t know any more about the matter than I do. Ay, but you shall feel something of it yet, Oswald Clive! If I cannot work love in that vacillating weak nature of yours, I can at least work mischief at your hearth—and in such a way, too, that you will cling once more to the despised Mathilde for the aid and strength that child-wife of yours will never bring.’

She was reasoning now; head, as usual, was asserting its dominion. Mathilde’s heart-storms, as a rule, were of very short duration. The love of power and that peculiar talent for intrigue which she possessed, would peep out even when her passions surged the fiercest, and invariably produced that method in her madness, which made it a very fear and dread.

A managing woman!—the very name itself evokes a shudder; for at the best, when she is guided by morality and principle, she is intolerable to her own, and the aversion of the sterner sex; but how far worse an intriguing woman, who is swayed by no ruling influence save her own capricious will! From such, the saints defend both her friends and her foes!

Mathilde was gradually growing calmer, and she had thrown herself back on the sofa in a favourite posture, with

her head resting on her folded arms, to think it all over, when the door opened softly, and Glory came in once more.

‘Are you better, mademoiselle? Lady Wilbraham sent me to enquire after you. She hopes you will not trouble yourself about me, but rest all day, and then we trust you will be quite right to-morrow.’

‘Thanks, dear child, I am quite well now. These attacks with me are very unfrequent, and pass quickly. If you would bring your work, and come and talk to me while I rest a little, I should be so glad! We must become friends, you know, and only by conversation can we learn to understand each other.’

Glory did as she was desired, and as she once had sat by Georgie in that same room, listening to the account of Clive’s proposal, so now she sat by Mathilde. She was a little, gentle, unobtrusive girl, and was quite ignorant of those wild passion-storms which seemed just now to be continually blowing up before the wind in the small circle of her immediate acquaintance.

‘I felt so ill all breakfast time, I paid but little heed to Sir Henry’s conversation. Tell me about these people,’ said the deceitful Mathilde, into whose soul every word Sir Henry had uttered was, as it were, fire-branded—‘do you know them yourself?’

‘Oh, yes; Georgie was here for some weeks in the summer, and I liked her so much; she was so bright and gay, and said such smart, funny things, we were always laughing.’

‘And Mr. What’s-his-name—Clive—was he here, too?’

‘Only at the croquet-party we had, and I am sure I wish he had never come.’

‘Why, what interest have you in the matter, my child?’ asked Mathilde, almost feelingly.

‘Well, I am sorry Georgie has married him, if he is such a bad man; besides, Cousin Henry has never looked the same since the day of that party. Don’t you think, too, it was very wrong and wicked of Georgie to deceive everyone, and go off in that rash way?’

‘Very,’ was Mathilde’s answer; but it was given as though the question interested her not. She was evidently thinking of something else. Sir Henry had not been himself since the croquet-party. She had remarked there was a weary, absent look about him, which could scarcely be

natural. So this was another of Miss Georgie's lovers. Yes, she must stay at Brinck Hall—she could not have better quarters for the present.

She lay motionless, and without speaking, for so long, that Glory at last asked if her head was very bad, and if she would like to be left alone.

'No, child—no,' she answered, rousing herself with an effort; 'talk away—it amuses me. Let me see—what were you saying?—Sir Henry, too, is in love with Miss Georgie. It would have been a better match for her, from all accounts.'

'So everybody thought, and I tried to persuade her that Sir Henry was much the nicer of the two, when she confided to me about Mr. Clive's proposal.'

'So, so, *petite*, you are not quite such a child as I took you for. You know something at second-hand, at all events, of that perpetual love-making which renders so many hearts desolate.'

Glory coloured up.

Oh! mademoiselle, perhaps I ought not to have said anything. Georgie begged me to be silent; but now she is married, I thought there would be no harm.'

'Always tell me everything without fear, dear Glory. I have come here to be your friend, you know, and I am not likely to betray you;' and she leant over and kissed her as she spoke. 'Did Sir Henry propose to Miss Georgie, as well as did Mr. Clive?'

'That I do not know; but they were continually together, and Georgie was always laughing to me about his being so "spoony," as she called it.'

'Do you think she cared at all about him?'

'I think she liked Mr. Clive best; but when he was not there she amused herself by flirting with Sir Henry. But how interested you are, mademoiselle, about these people you have never seen!'

'An elopement, somehow, always has an interest for a woman, Glory. Besides, too, I am fond of studying human nature, and I cannot help thinking of the girl who refused Sir Henry, with this house and its concomitant fortune, for a man who, at the best, seems to be a pauper; but, as your great English bard has it, "Human love is not the growth of human will."'

‘I hope Georgie will be happy,’ said Glory, quietly.

Mathilde looked at her—she could not, in her heart, echo the sentiment.

‘Let us change the subject,’ she said ; ‘we have discussed other people’s affairs quite long enough ; and although we purpose idling away this first day of our acquaintance, yet we might talk on more profitable topics ; or, stay, will you get a book and read to me ?—some liquid flowing English poetry ; Moore, if you like—he is so fresh and full of joy. To-morrow I will read to you in French—you don’t know how I love the beautiful. Dear Glory, as long as we are together, we will try to gather as much poetry as we can out of life.’

And so the morning sped swiftly away. Glory was enchanted with her new companion. The child’s life up to the present time had been a solitary one. Lady Wilbraham and Sir Henry were both too practical to be interested in the books and pursuits which were Glory’s little inner world ; and to have found some one at last who would patiently listen for hours while she read Tom Moore’s sunshiny, brilliant poems, was indeed a pleasure.

The first step was gained—Glory was won.





CHAPTER XVII.

CHEAP AND DIRTY.



CLOSE London street, with all its concomitant miseries in the form of cries, organ-grinders, bawling men and women, and squalid squalling children—in fact, an incessant discord, which goes on from sunrise until the night has pretty far advanced. The interior of the houses, too, presenting no very inviting aspect. Lodging-houses in the fullest acceptation of the not very pleasingly suggestive word ;—cheap, threadbare, and dirty. A place in which you would be waited on by a slatternly maid, and feel bound to look twice at everything she brought you, before your sense of cleanliness would allow you to make use of it. In a room on the first floor of one of these dismal, dirty abodes sat pretty Georgie, on a low footstool, in front of a smoky miserable fire. Clive was stretched full length on a dilapidated old sofa near her—his legs thrown over the end, high above his head. He was the very picture of idleness and despair. In fact, so dejected and wretched was the appearance of both, that no one would have guessed they had been lovers but a short time back—man and wife but the brief space of three weeks. The honeymoon had not waned yet, but bitters of some sort seemed to have replaced the honey. They had been silent for a long while. Georgie was watching the fire, trying to make out that some future luck was in store for her, predicted by the fitful movements of the smouldering coals. Clive seemed to be asleep ; at last he moved restlessly, and throwing his legs down from their high perch, jerked out an oath as he rolled heavily round.

‘ Oh ! Oswald, don’t swear, dear ; and do rouse up and talk to me. I know this life is very miserable for you, but I cannot help it.’

'Who said you could?—but that does not make it any better, does it? Come here, Georgie.'

Georgie did as she was desired, and pushing her stool close to the sofa, sat down beside her husband. He pulled her towards him, and toyed with her soft luxuriant curls.

'It was a mistake, Georgie,' he said,—'a great mistake.'

'What?'

'Why, our marriage. We should have waited, at any rate, till times grew brighter.'

'Which would have been never. I do not regret it, if you do not, Oswald. I am very happy with you—that is to say, when you are nice and kind ; when you get morose and gloomy I feel as if I should like to kill myself or you, or do some desperate thing.'

'How can I be otherwise, when here we are, penned up in this filthy hole of a lodging, with scarcely a penny to bless ourselves? I have only a few pounds left, and when they are gone, the devil only knows where more are to come from. You know as well as I do, that I am afraid to show my face in my old haunts ; that French story is sure to have reached them by this time.'

'And a very good thing too. I hope it has cured you of gambling for ever.'

'Georgie, you are a fool to talk such nonsense. How else am I to get any money? Oh, what a cursed idiot I was when I doubled my troubles, by having you to provide for as well as myself! What foul fiend possessed you, girl, to come to me that night? Live for your sake, indeed! Far better that that pistol had done its work!'

'Oh, don't!—don't talk so, Oswald!—you make me wish I were in a prison—dead—anywhere out of your way; and yet I do love you very dearly,' and the tears began to course each other slowly down her cheeks.

'Now, for mercy's sake, child, don't begin to whimper! You fascinated me in the first instance, because you were always bright and saucy ; and now, hang me if for the last week you have not been perpetually on the snivel! I am sure, if I regret our marriage, you do so too, or you would not be incessantly crying.'

'Don't be unjust, Oswald,' answered Georgie, drying her eyes and gulping down her tears, 'I should not mind if I had only a crust of bread to eat, as long as you were cheer-

ful and contented ; but to see you lying on the sofa, groaning and swearing over your luck, all day, I will own, makes me very miserable.'

'What on earth is the good of you, if you cannot suggest some means of helping a fellow out of his difficulties? Crying is babyish, and I hate babies. I thought you were pluck to the backbone—I have been mistaken, that is all. If Madame d'Aubigné were anywhere near, she would put me on my legs again in next to no time—but, of course, she has disappeared, just when she is wanted. I went over to Twickenham, while you were crying last night, to see if I could find her ; but the devil knows where she has gone !'

Georgie started to her feet.

'You have been to see that woman ! Oswald, how dare you ?'

'Now then, little one, don't excite yourself—there is nothing to be jealous about. If you had ingenuity enough to pull me through this mess, there would be no occasion to apply to Madame d'Aubigné.' And, taking a cigar-case from his pocket, he coolly lighted a cigar, and began smoking it as he lay there.

'You never even hinted that there was anything I could do.'

'I thought your woman's tact would have found that out. Madame d'Aubigné would not have wanted to be told.'

The colour came and went in Georgie's face, and the pretty eyes lighted up as she stamped her foot petulantly.

'Twit me with that woman and her doings again, and I will kill you on the spot !' she said, spitefully.

'Now you look like the Georgie of old,' and Oswald laughed. 'The demoness is far preferable to the baby,' and he threw his arm round her ; but she wriggled herself away from him.

'You are a nasty wretch !' she said, 'and I will not be teased. Some fine day you will find me gone. I will run away and go on the stage. Do you think I should make any money ?'

'If you denuded yourself of the greatest portion of your wearing apparel, and danced a *can-can*, I think very probably you might.'

'You wretch ! when I do suggest a mode of gaining a livelihood, you turn it into ridicule. I decline to speak to

you at all,' and, shrugging her shoulders, the little beauty turned her back on him, and sat down at the window, looking out into the noisy bustling street.

Clive laughed cheerily ; he had sworn away some of the superfluous steam of his ill-temper, and was, for the nonce, in a better humour. Georgie's total want of knowledge of the ways and means of life amused him. He regretted that he had married her, because he saw that, nursed in the lap of luxury, she was no fit companion to share his hard, uncertain life ; but still, for all that, he loved her and delighted in her.

'Oh! Oswald, I will tell you what I will do,' she cried, after sitting silent, thoughtfully looking into the street for some time—'I will go and see mamma this afternoon, and ask her to let us go and live with her.'

Poor little trampled chick ! the first world-storm that ruffles her downy wings, she would fain run back to the soft nest and warm, cosy shelter of the parent-bird.

'That is not a bad idea, if it were feasible,' answered Clive ; 'but Lady Ida is probably very angry, and will, perhaps, not even see you.'

'Bah! you do not know mamma—she never was angry with me for ten consecutive minutes in her life ; and I will plead so hard for you, you nasty old pet, though you don't deserve it, you have grown so cross and disagreeable lately.'

'Tell Lady Ida that, and I should think she would receive me with open arms.'

'Do you take me for a fool? I shall tell her you are a paragon of excellence ; but I shall not think it any the more for that,' she said, as she danced across the room, bright and joyous as of old, charmed with the picture she had painted for them both.

'Just pause a moment in your rapturous effusions,' said Clive. 'Even supposing the mother consents to this plan of yours, you forget that the first time I am seen out of my hiding-place I shall probably be quodded, on suspicion of having surreptitiously disposed of young Baird.'

Georgie thought for a moment.

'Ah! now I am beginning to see what you wanted that Frenchwoman for. I will do it, Oswald.'

'Do what?'

'Beg—kneel—implore till I get this dark shadow shifted,

and then we will be, oh! so jolly—go to parties and balls and everybody will envy me my handsome, darling husband.

‘Gently—gently; all this is easier said than done.’

‘Well, I saved you from the police in Paris, you ungrateful ape! You should have heard how I coaxed and teased Sir Henry Wilbraham. I believe I almost promised to marry him, if he let you off. Poor old saint! I wonder how he feels after being sold?—and for such a wretched sinner as you, too!’

‘Your language is not complimentary, Mrs. Clive. But instead of talking nonsense, perhaps you will inform me how you propose to put this little scheme of yours into practice?’

‘It is not so difficult as you imagine. People will do a good deal for *me*.’ And she threw her head up with a toss. ‘You will live to thank your wife yet for your deliverance from annoyance, sir. Well, I will go and see mamma first, and coax her into a good humour, then I shall find out all about the “bloodhounds,” as you call them, and get mamma to write to Sir Henry Wilbraham, and ask him to cajole them—pay them—in fact, get rid of them in some way—I care not how, as long as he does it; which he will for *me*.’

‘You have great faith in your own fascinations.’

‘Would not you, even now, do anything I asked you very prettily?’ she said, saucily. ‘At all events, you would have been very ready to please me a few weeks ago, Oswald.’

He drew her towards him, and kissed her.

‘You are not such a bad little woman after all,’ he said. ‘Why the devil you did not think of all this before, I can’t conceive. But look here, Georgie, I’ll have no philandering with that fellow, Wilbraham—I have no faith in saints.’

‘And I’ll have no spooning with that big-eyed French woman. I have no faith in the odour of sanctity she assumes. I know she is a fiend.’

And so, half an hour later, Georgie, for the first time in her life walking through the London streets alone, sallied forth, as she said, ‘to coax mamma.’ For the last three weeks she and Clive had only sniffed the fresh air when the shades of darkness veiled the earth. There was too much danger, in various forms, hanging over him for him to care to face the daylight very boldly; and even then he had ventured perhaps too far, for during one of those short evening strolls he had not been unobserved. So strange and fortuitous are the

caprices of luck, that in a vast city like London, with all the chances in your favour of, with care, remaining for months without coming across a single acquaintance, Clive was recognised when he least wished to be known. Georgie had been gone but a short time, when the unpleasant lodging-house maid thrust her head in at the door, and with the exclamation, 'A gentleman wants yer,' showed a man into the room. It was Dillon. Clive started from the recumbent position in which he was smoking at his ease, and looked at his visitor with no very welcome expression on his face. They had been friends once, and but for Mathilde's warning he would have hailed him gladly now ; as it was, he feared him.

'Well, Clive, so I have found you out at last,' he said, cheerily, extending his hand the while.

Clive touched it coldly with the tips of his fingers.

'What do you want with me?' he asked. 'We have not met for so long, I do not imagine you would have taken the trouble to look me up unless you wanted something.'

'You have grown bitter since the old rowdy days in the States, when we quaffed life's pleasures in reckless merriment.'

'Hardship and penury are enemies to geniality,' murmured Clive, as he sank back on the sofa. 'I have had a weary, cursed time of it for many months now, and the horizon does not seem likely to clear, either.'

'Why, man, I thought you were swelling it on the fat of the land, with pockets stuffed with gold.'

'Did you? That is the reason you came to pay me a visit, I suppose ; however, let me tell you, you are deucedly mistaken.'

'Come, come, Clive, don't be dogged. You know well enough it is not my form to seek my pals in sunshine, and desert them in storm. Tell me, is it true that you are married?'

'Worse luck to it—yes.'

'Why? Has not the wife turned out trumps?'

'Oh, she is well enough, but when a fellow's luck is at zero, he is an ass to burden himself with a wife at all.'

'Ah, well, we must hope for better days. But look here, Clive, how comes it that you are in this desperate condition? I heard you left New York under favourable auspices.'

'Of course you did. I guessed all along that that was

what you were driving at. You want to unravel that cursed story, but you will get nothing out of me !'

Dillon looked fairly bewildered. He had always imagined that when Clive was cross-examined the whole mystery would be cleared up. There had, then, been foul play of some sort. Poor old Sternheim had more penetration than he had given him credit for.

'Nonsense, Clive, this is childish,' he said. 'Surely you are not going to withhold from young Baird's friends the information they require as to his whereabouts?'

'The devil only knows where he is, I don't; but why should you take it upon yourself to question me? You are not his father, by chance?'

'I come as Sternheim's friend. I presume you will recognise his right to ask information about the boy he committed to your charge?'

'He may ask, and be d——d to him; I have nothing to tell.'

'This is absurd, ridiculous; you surely can at least say where and when you saw him last?'

'Suppose I don't choose to answer any questions about the boy at all?'

'Then, I am afraid you will lay yourself open to grave suspicion, and be made to answer them in a way which will not be very pleasing to you.'

'I was an idiot ever to undertake the care of him. How could I help the boy skedaddling, I should like to know?'

'Prove that he has skedaddled, and some of the *onus*, at least, will be removed from you. As your friend, let me advise you to do this, for, at present, the charge hinted against you is of a far more serious nature.'

'Pray, may I ask what the deuce all this means? The boy is gone—gone, I tell you; why should I be made responsible for his disappearance? He was not a child in leading-strings, that he could be made to do exactly what I pleased. Anyhow, he's off, and does not seem likely to turn up again in a hurry, either.'

'Clive, Clive, I am afraid you know more of this story than you choose to say.'

'Why should I withhold the truth? If I had anything to tell,' answered Clive, 'I should only be too thankful to be able to clear up the whole story. The knowledge that I

undertook to look after the young fool, and that he has chosen to take himself off in this mysterious way, is not very pleasing, let me tell you ; and it is devilish hard lines that I should be abused into the bargain.'

Dillon shook his head, but said nothing.

'Of course you suspect, like the rest of them, that I have murdered him. Now look here, Dillon ; I have no doubt you think me a depraved beast, whose word is not worth taking, but, on my oath, I swear I have had no hand in that boy's death, nor do I believe that he is dead.'

'I am delighted to hear you say this,' said Dillon, cheerily ; 'but can you give no clue as to where he is likely to be found?'

'Fooling, I should imagine. He was always fond of his own way. He will turn up some day, when he has had his lark.'

'My dear fellow, I am not quite such a simpleton as to believe that the boy could go right away in this unaccountable fashion, and that you who were always with him should know nothing of the reason.'

'Oh ! you are very sharp ; it is a pity you did not have charge of him yourself. Anyhow, he proved too much for me—the young Yankee brute ! He want a bear-leader, indeed !—he bear-led me. Now look here, Dillon, just consider for a moment : was I likely to smother or otherwise dispose of that young whelp, considering the amount of coin he always had in hand, and my own want of that commodity ? It stands to reason I should not have been such an ass.'

'Well, the whole thing beats me hollow. I own I do not understand it in the least,' said Dillon, with a shrug. 'By Jove ! I am beginning to think that Frenchwoman had something to do with the business. She owned to an acquaintance with the boy, and has looked very queer about him more than once.'

'What Frenchwoman ? What new track are you on ?'

'A certain Madame d'Aubigné. Now don't pretend you do not know her. She is far too handsome to have escaped your observation.'

'Madame d'Aubigné !—oh, ah, yes, everybody at the German baths knew her. She had to do with that young fool ?—that is a good joke ! Why, she was far too great a queen of fashion to bother her head about a chit like that ?'

‘Well, you do astonish me! She is certainly a very pretty woman, but I had no idea she was a leader of fashion.’

‘What did you think she was?’

‘What she represents herself to be—the wife of a French gentleman who is shut up in some madhouse, and has thus left her unprotected, and *not* overburdened with money. I understood she had come to England to economise and live quietly.’

Clive smiled to himself over Mathilde’s assumed decorum, though he felt rather ‘riled’ that she had not given him the cue. Dillon had never been considered very strait-laced. How could he know she was playing the prude with him?

‘Well, I did not say she is not all you believe her to be. I know very little about her, except that she is devilish handsome, and all the men raved about her. So she is in London, is she?’

‘Have you not seen her?’ asked Dillon, as he thought of the hansom cab outside the music-hall.

‘My dear fellow, I have just married a wife, and a very pretty little girl, too. What should I be running after other women for? In future I intend to leave that sort of game to you bachelors,’ and Clive stretched himself wearily.

‘Do you mean to say you have not seen Madame d’Aubigné since she has been in England?’ asked Dillon, suspiciously.

‘I mean to say nothing of the kind. I interest myself far too little about Madame d’Aubigné, in any way, to attempt to burden my recollection with when I saw her last.’

‘It is all very queer,’ remarked Dillon. ‘I am, however, beginning to see my way a bit. I must say I doubted that Frenchwoman’s soft, blandishing airs. I thought she was somewhat of an adventuress, and I believe I am right.’

‘Entirely wrong, I should imagine, my dear Dillon. If one may credit hearsay, Madame d’Aubigné is all she represents herself to be; and more too, for I have always heard that she is a kind, good-hearted woman, and a staunch friend. They say that she has married a brute, but that she cannot help, and it is neither your business nor mine,’ said Clive, trying, if possible, to erase any suspicions his unguarded remarks might have left on Dillon’s mind. ‘Why you should seek to mix her up with young Baird I do not know. Well would it have been for him if he had fallen into such good hands!’

'I wish to goodness you could be prevailed upon to say into whose hands he has fallen ! It would save much annoyance to his friends, and, in all probability, much misery to the boy himself.'

'Now, look here, Dillon ; I am not in a humour to brook any more of this twaddle. There was a time in the old days, as you know, when I would not have stood so much ; but adversity has taught me patience. There is a limit, however, to my endurance, and let me warn you that you have gone far enough. Can't you take an answer when one is given you ? I suppose I shall have that Old Sternheim down on me next, with his broken English.'

'Poor old chap ! he is not likely to molest you ; he is lying very ill at my lodgings. I would ask you to come and see him, only I think very probably the sight of you would excite him too much.'

'I should think in all probability it would. At all events, I have not the smallest intention of coming. Just tell him the best story you can about the boy, and, for goodness' sake, let us have an end to these useless inquiries !'

'Well, they don't tend to much good. "God's little lambs will play," as the saying is. I suppose we must take the thing in that spirit, and hope that, at no very future date, the boy will grow tired of his frolic, and re-appear.'

'Spoken like a sensible man !' said Clive, crossing his legs with a complacency which had been by no means apparent in the earlier stage of the conversation.

'The only thing I fear is, that the father may arrive one day from the States. Do you think, my dear Clive, he will view the matter as leniently ? He is sharp and shrewd, if I recollect him rightly, and will naturally look to you for his son.'

Clive winced.

'I do not fear him,' he said, 'and I certainly am not going to bother myself about what he will do or say until he arrives. I should have written and acquainted him with his son's disappearance, but the truth is, I felt rather ashamed of having let him slip through my fingers. Well, Georgie, you have soon come back,' he called out, as his wife entered the room and shook hands cordially with Mr. Dillon.

'Are you not glad to see me ?'

'That depends on the sort of news you bring.'

'That is the way husbands talk three weeks after marriage,' she said laughingly to Dillon. 'You ought to have taught him better manners during your visit.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Georgie, but tell me if you have seen your mother?'

She nodded her head in acquiescence, but instead of answering in words, she kept up her conversation with Dillon.

'How did you find us out? Do you know it is very rude to break in on a honeymoon? Poor Oswald is, I know, moped to death for want of male society, yet it is not very flattering to find he seeks it the moment my back is turned.'

'Excuse me, but if you deserted him, what could you expect? However, you see, the society sought him—he did not seek it.'

'And on a devilishly disagreeable subject,' snarled Clive. 'For goodness' sake, Georgie, stop this drivelling nonsense, and tell me what Lady Ida says.'

Georgie was serious in a moment when she saw her husband was really in earnest.

'Mamma is all right; she will do whatever we like. But tell me what has happened since I went out?'

'Nothing, nothing; don't excite yourself—only the usual inquiries after that young reprobate, Baird.'

'Is Mr. Dillon on the enemy's side, against my husband? Oh, fie!' and Georgie, clinging to Clive's arm, looked her prettiest up into the painter's face.

'On the contrary, my dear Mrs. Clive, your husband has nearly convinced me that he knows nothing of the matter.'

'Only *nearly*! Before you leave this room, let me convince you *quite*. He is entirely innocent of any participation in this boy's fate, whatever it may be. Why, Mr. Dillon, I liked you the first moment I saw you; you surely are not going to incur my displeasure now. Come, let us be friends,' and she held out her hand.

Dillon clasped it warmly.

'You and yours have no cause to fear ill from me,' he said, in a low voice, as he turned to take his departure.

'Bravo!' cried Clive, when the door was fairly closed; 'not a bad assertion, little G., considering you know nothing whatever of my share in that boy's history.'

'No, but I have a belief in you—in your truth and honour.'

If you fail me, Oswald, then I shall have no faith in man or woman either, and the world will become a desert.'

There was a cloud on his brow, but she saw it not, for he stooped and kissed her.

'So mamma is not very angry with us, pet,' he said, turning the conversation into another channel.

'No; she cried and made as much fuss over me as if I had gained the Victoria Cross, instead of having taken you for a husband. And she says we may go there now directly—this very minute, if we like; so let us be off, for I hate these dirty lodgings, where we have been "cabined, cribbed, confined, kept like tigers in too small a cage;" besides, I wish to exhibit myself in my new dignity of *marîée*.'

'You have forgotten half your mission, I suppose, amid your foolish rhapsodies. What about the inquiries likely to be made after me?'

'No, I have forgotten nothing, you cross old dear. I made mamma write to Sir Henry, and I added a postscript, asking him to use his best efforts to smooth your path. In the meantime, it will be far pleasanter to lie hidden in mamma's house than in these dingy quarters.'

'I hate being beholden to this man,' muttered Clive.

'You *must* hold a candle to the old gentleman sometimes, *amico mio*; in the present instance, he comes in the form of a saint.'

'From what Dillon says, unless that boy's father comes over, I don't think there is much to fear.'

'All the better for us; but nevertheless it is a stroke of policy to make a friend of Sir Henry Wilbraham.'





CHAPTER XVIII.

WILL SHE ENSLAVE HIM?

MATHILDE had now been for some days at Brinck Hall, and she had gained a complete ascendancy over Glory. They led a sort of dreamy life, which to Glory was very pleasant. True, their manner of passing time was not exactly what wisdom and common sense would have suggested as the most desirable for a young imaginative girl ; but neither Lady Wilbraham nor Sir Henry interfered, and Glory was happy. In the essentially practical atmosphere in which she had hitherto dwelt, she had probably been overtaxed with school-work, village visiting, et cetera. The natural bent of her mind was for solitary reading, and constant tugging in another direction had given her a yet stronger bias towards a life of peaceful enjoyment, in which she might dawdle away her time over her books and her painting, an art for which she had latterly evinced a decided talent. Madame d'Aubigné came, and Glory was delighted, as she thought she had at last found a kindred spirit.

Over Lady Wilbraham, Mathilde's power was little less than over Glory. She had already quite forgotten the difference of their faith, and no one would have made her believe that a being endued with such purity of thought, such angelic sweetness, could be other than a perfect Christian. The art of dissembling and thus gaining power over her fellows being Mathilde's forte, these two unsophisticated women were but the playthings of her pleasure ; but that dark, stern, heavy-browed Baronet, who had seen something of life, and who, at the least, thought himself wise enough to detect gold from dross as the human coin passed perpetually through his fingers, he would not be so easily imposed upon ; and yet Mathilde had set her heart on winning his confidence and regard ! Hitherto, with a moroseness

which was not natural to him, he had kept carefully out of her way. She, the while, was studying his peculiarities from a distance, aided not a little by many stray bits of information which Glory, in her guilelessness, bestowed unwittingly.

At last, one morning, while Glory was finishing a drawing, Mathilde, tempted by the unusual luxury of a bright November sun, had strolled out towards the little wood, erst the scene of Georgie's and Clive's meeting in the warm Summer-time. Perhaps Mathilde was aware that Sir Henry, too, had been seized with a rambling fit in that direction. However that may be, thither she directed her steps ; and as Sir Henry heard the rustling made by her footfalls on the dead leaves, he turned. The gloomy expression his countenance had worn of late brightened when he beheld Mathilde, her warm, fresh beauty enhanced by the soft rays of the Winter sun. She moved gracefully towards him, draped in those masses of neutral colour Mathilde knew so well how to arrange. There never was a hard line about her—her dress, her *coiffure*, everything was in perfect unison, truly artistic in its entirety. She walked straight up to Sir Henry, who lifted his hat as she approached. There was something about this woman which abashed him—he was not at home with her, and could not get over the feeling that she should not be there, installed as Glory's companion.

‘What a lovely morning !’ she said, in her soft voice. ‘I see the sunshine has tempted you, too, into its warmth and brightness. If the trees were only clad in green, it would be quite like Summer. Don't you wish it were always Summer, Sir Henry ?’

‘In another world we may hope that it will be so. Here we must be content to bear with cold and storm,’ was his reply, somewhat gravely given.

Mathilde shivered.

‘Oh, I do not like cold,’ she said, ‘in any form. I have had my share of it, which, perhaps, makes me dread it the more. But the sun *must* be going to shine on me now.’

‘I hope so,’ he answered, kindly. ‘You are young to have had much to complain of as yet from the world's hard usage.’

‘Ah ! Sir Henry, the Winter of life visits one in its coldest form when it comes in the garb of Poverty. That is

a phase of misery which, thank God, you have never felt ; but do not let us talk of it, or think of it. I am, oh ! so happy here ; and as long as I can retain the love and goodwill of Lady Wilbraham, and that little darling, Glory, no wintry winds will ever touch me. They may blow due east as much as they like.'

'I am glad you are satisfied with your new position, my dear mademoiselle. I am sure we shall all try to make it as pleasant as possible to you.'

'Thank you with my whole heart,' she said. Then she paused. 'But may not I too give some thing in return for so much courtesy shown to me, a poor lonely foreigner? May I not do something beyond the duty for which I am paid?'

'Certainly, if you like ; though I do not quite understand your meaning,' said Sir Henry, smiling.

'Ah, monsieur, you will forgive me. We foreigners are not like *you* English people—we cannot be reserved and lent when our feelings are concerned. We must give our emotions vent in words. The fulness of our hearts, whether in joy or in sorrow, cannot be restrained.'

Sir Henry looked amazed ; he was at a loss to understand where this sudden outburst of sentiment was going to end.

'Ah,' she continued, 'I have offended you. Let me go back to the solitude of my own chamber, there in penances to remit my fault.'

'My dear young lady, I am not in the very least offended ; only pray explain yourself.'

'It is of yourself I would speak,' said Mathilde, looking down. 'I cannot bear to see you so dejected and unhappy. Can nothing be done to make your life more joyous? Is there no one to sympathise with you in your trouble?' And she looked suddenly up at him with her large passionate eyes.

'How do you know I have a sorrow?'

'Am I a woman, and incapable of making that discovery?'

'My mother and Glory are ignorant of it.'

'They have not been proved in the fire of suffering, as I have been. But you are not offended with me for probing an open wound? We may be friends still, I hope?'

'Friends—oh ! yes,' said Sir Henry, testily ; 'all you women seem to think I am a very safe man to make a friend of. As for loving me, no woman was ever in love with me in my life.'

Mathilde laughed.

'Excuse me for doubting you,' she said, softly ; 'but I can scarcely believe that. Some pretty English aristocrat will break her heart about you some day ; and, in the meantime, I, poor and humble as I am, esteem it a high honour to be allowed to call you friend. You will come into our little sitting-room sometimes, when Glory and I are at work, and let us try to amuse you. It makes me quite melancholy to see you moping about these grounds alone.'

'I will—I will,' he answered ; 'and thank you most cordially, my dear mademoiselle, for your kind sympathy.' And he took the hand which hung listlessly by her side, and pressed it warmly.

'And now,' she said, 'Glory will be wondering where I am lingering so long. *Au revoir*, Sir Henry.'

Thus they parted. Mathilde had made a desperate throw, and, as she walked back to the house, she did not feel very sure whether she had caught her fish or not. There was something so phlegmatic about that burly, handsome Englishman, it was by no means easy to make an impression on him ; but she was getting very tired of being reduced to the society of Lady Wilbraham and Glory, and she felt that she and Sir Henry would remain for ever on the same distant terms, if she did not make the first advances.

And he, what course did his meditations take, when he was left to the solitary enjoyment of them ? Being a man, his first thought was that she was a very handsome, elegant-looking woman ; then he came to the conclusion that his life was very dull, and that, Georgie being lost to him for ever, he might as well amuse himself a little by talking to this sympathising Frenchwoman. No harm could possibly come of it ; besides, too, he would be better able to judge whether she was really a proper companion for Glory or not. It was, perhaps, strange that the practical man had not made up his mind on that subject during the last ten minutes' conversation ; but, as others of his sex have been before him, so, unknown to himself, he was, for the time, bewitched.

Thus days passed on, and the acquaintance between

Mathilde and Sir Henry, which had started into life among the leafless trees in the little wood, had already ripened into an intimacy. Many were the visits he paid the cosy, sunny morning-room, where Mathilde and Glory passed the greater portion of their time. Glory, in her 'princely heart of innocence,' could not understand the change which had come over her sedate, somewhat silent cousin. He was so conversational and pleasant of late, and the time, when he came to sit with them, passed so agreeably and quickly, it quite surprised Glory, who had always been a little bit afraid of Sir Henry. He scarcely ever hunted either, now, which was very unusual for him, as, during previous winters, he had been a devoted lover of sport, and had entered into the spirit of it with all the zeal and ardour usually evinced by English country gentlemen of the right sort ; but now—

He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.

Yet, with all his dalliance about Mathilde, Sir Henry had not forgotten Georgie ; but he got on so much better in this new flirtation. Love-making evidently was not his natural bent, and he was perpetually being scared off his ground by Georgie's sharp retorts, while Mathilde always held out a friendly hand to help him over the rough places. To any third person experienced in the workings of these matters, it would have been very obvious that she was making more than half the running herself, and that the careful, cautious Sir Henry had, in a few short days, become enslaved—a puppet in the hands of this wily, intriguing woman.

'Earlsfort is coming to-morrow—he has offered himself on a visit for a few days,' was Sir Henry's announcement as he turned his letters over at breakfast one morning, when the present state of things had existed about a fortnight. 'I suppose he must come, eh, mother?'

Lady Wilbraham did not see the slightest objection ; but her son did, though he did not like to own it. He did not want his repose interfered with. He was very well satisfied with things as they were—for the present, at least ; and he rather feared 'the quips and sentences, and paper bullets of the brain' with which he knew Earlsfort would assail him, for having allowed himself to be so soon humoured by another woman. He looked across the table at Mathilde—she was

all smiles. An addition to the family circle was, of all things, what she would have preferred. Sir Henry had proved a much easier victim than she had expected ; and now that he was caught, she was quite ready for another venture.

So the following day Sir Henry's dog-cart went to the station, and brought back Dick Earlsfort.

'Now, I do call this a stretch of friendship, Hal, my boy. Fancy me voluntarily enduring the horrors of the country in an English winter.' And he shivered as he stood, wrapped in furs from head to foot, on the steps of the house door. 'But I pitied you, old fellow, left here to pine in solitude amid the marshes of mud I see everywhere around, so I thought I must come and look after you. I hope you appreciate the motive.'

'You are a good fellow, Dick. I hope you will not find it as dull here as you expect. You shall have a mount tomorrow. The hounds meet close at hand.'

'Not for Joe, I thank you kindly. I never risk my neck over cruel sport. It is a way I have, to object to it. It may be peculiar, but so it is. I would not keep you in, though, for the world.'

'Oh! I have not been out much this winter.'

'So I thought—moping. That is a bad habit too—worse than hunting.'

'Well, never mind. Come into my room, and have a cigar before you dress for dinner.'

At dinner Captain Earlsfort was introduced to the ladies, and as he looked round the comfortable, well-curtained dining-room, with its cheerful fire of huge logs, and then at the pleasant faces round him, two of which were unmistakably above the average in beauty, he stretched his legs out under the well-spread mahogany, and smiled complacently. The luxurious man of the world, who was a *gourmet* in all his tastes, began to think that this week in the country, which he had dedicated to friendship, would not be so very unendurable after all. 'Wine, women, warmth,' would, as usual, he supposed, exercise a benign influence ; particularly too, when the feminine element, in its fairest form, presented itself so very unexpectedly before him.

The dinner passed more cheerfully than dinners usually did in that staid old house, for Earlsfort, with his ready talk, invariably overturned all barriers set up by prudishness and

formalism ; and Mathilde was not backward in assisting him—in fact, she came out in a way which rather astonished Sir Henry. She had never been so bright and joyous, or shown so much knowledge of the world and its ways during her interviews with him, as she did to-night with the talkative, rattling Earlsfort. Mathilde was carried away for the time. During the humdrum life of the last few months, she had been debarred from the enjoyment of congenial society, and this man, who was thoroughly a member of the world in which she had once lived, set her heart beating and her cheeks glowing ; and while she talked on carelessly with him, she forgot her self-imposed disguise, and dropped her cloak of meekness and decorum. She was like the maiden in *Æsop's* fable, who was turned from a cat into a woman. She sat very demurely at the board's end till a mouse ran before her.

So the evening passed away ; Sir Henry very fidgetty and testy the while. He was perhaps just a little bit jealous at the turn things had taken. There was, too, a familiarity about the easy, go-a-head conversation carried on by Mathilde and Earlsfort which not a little 'riled' him.

At last the ladies retired for the night, and Sir Henry and his friend proceeded to indulge in the fragrant weed over the wood fire in the well-appointed smoking-room.

'By Jove, Hal !' exclaimed Earlsfort, when they were fairly settled in their respective corners, 'I thought better things of you. The devil a bit of pity will you ever get from me again when you retire down-hearted into country quarters ! Why, that young cousin of yours is the freshest, prettiest little sixteen-year-old I have seen for many a day ; and that Frenchwoman—why, where the deuce did you pick her up ?'

'My mother engaged her as a companion for Glory, while I was away in Paris lately.'

'Your mother, eh !—she engaged her, did she ? I should like to have a peep into her antecedents ; and I will, too, before I have done.'

'What do you mean ?' asked Sir Henry, uneasily.

'Nothing very particular, only——'

'Go on ; can't you speak ?'

'Well, she is very good-looking—that is all.'

'The poor woman cannot help that, I suppose ?'

'No, no—certainly not ; as you would justly observe,

she did not make herself. But what has she come here for? I should very much like to know.'

'It was a chance, I presume, as those things generally are.'

'Oh! a devil of a chance, I make no doubt. All I can say is, defend me from such!'

'What, in Heaven's name, do you mean? You speak in riddles, man! The chance has been a lucky one—for us, at least. Mademoiselle la Fitte is an accomplished gentlewoman—in every way a most desirable companion for Glory; added to which she is most scrupulously conscientious, and very highly-principled.'

Captain Earlsfort took his legs down from a comfortable position in which he had perched them on the mantel-shelf, and turned himself round, chair and all, so as to face Sir Henry.

'Have late occurrences driven you mad, or are you trying to make a fool of me?' he asked, seriously.

'Neither the one nor the other. I am in my sober senses, and I am relating honest truth.'

'By jingo! I knew your knowledge of the world was not letter A, number 1, but I did not think you were quite so easily done, my good friend Hal.'

'Not very civil language. You presume on long intimacy,' said Sir Henry, growing angry.

'Now, don't flash and thunder, or do anything tempestuous. A few wholesome truths are necessary sometimes. The cleverest among us have a way of making mistakes.'

'What mistake have I made, and what have you to insinuate against Mademoiselle la Fitte? Recollect it is a serious thing, Dick, to blow on a woman's fair fame.'

'Quite aware of the fact, my good fellow. Though I have knocked about, and lived hard enough, God knows, in my time, yet a woman's reputation is a fragile little commodity I have been rather careful over. I don't think this French friend of yours will be injured by any remarks of mine, and that innocent young cousin of yours will not be improved if she remain much longer in the house.'

'Have you any reason for these assertions? What do you know of the lady?' And Sir Henry looked very white; a most unmistakeable storm was brewing.

'She is an adventuress, without a doubt. It is needless

to say any more. Why, Hal, I do believe you are infatuated with this woman ! You must be, or you could never have been so blind ; you would otherwise have seen in ten minutes that she is no fit inmate for a steady going English household.'

'I cannot believe this, and I will not !' said Sir Henry. 'Have you had any previous acquaintance with her, or do you know anything to prove this ?'

Dick Earlsfort shook his head.

'As far as I am individually concerned, I want no proof. I rely entirely on the evidence of my own senses ; but I will undertake to satisfy you on the subject in the course of a few days.'

'I cannot in the least make out what you mean. I have seen a good deal of Mademoiselle la Fitte during the last week or two, and have never observed anything the least fast about her. Half the young ladies of high birth of the present day are ten times more go-ahead in their manners than she is. It is her excessive gentleness and her soft, winning ways which are so very taking.'

'Well, they seem to have fetched you, at all events ; and, my good fellow, if you choose to burn your fingers, I do not object in the very least, only I would have the object of all this admiration removed a little farther off, if I were you.'

'Now, look here, Earlsfort. These inuendoes must end ;' and Sir Henry planted himself with his back to the fireplace, looking his fiercest. 'You and I have known each other some years, and I have no desire to quarrel with you—above all, too, in my own house ; but it is only due to the regard and respect I have for Mademoiselle la Fitte, that I should not hear a word of slander uttered against her without defending her ; and, by heavens, I will, and to the utmost too !'

'*Halte là*, my dear Hal ! I have said my say—let it be *pax* between us. It is no business of mine, after all, and I was a fool to make any little impertinent remarks—meddlers generally get hit the hardest in a fray. To change the subject, I shall run over to Paris again next week, I think ; London is nasty at this time of year. I am afraid I am not English enough in my tastes to glory in the fogs.'

But the even current of their conversation was ruffled, and, easy talker though Dick Earlsfort was, he could not smoothe the troubled surface. Sir Henry was in no mood

for chat ; he was angry with his friend for stirring up this subject, and determined not to believe one word against Mathilde, yet angry too with himself for his own obstinacy. That something *sub rosâ* he had detected when he first saw her would ever and anon peep up, and make him wish, as he had then done, that she had never come to Brinck Hall. So they finished their cigars, and went moodily to bed.

Had Mathilde known what keen observation she was undergoing next morning at breakfast, it is probable she would have been less demonstrative in her manner.

During the morning the younger ladies strolled with the gentlemen down the hill to the village. Sir Henry was still very testy and out of humour—so much so that Captain Earlsfort determined to shorten his visit, and let the storm blow quietly over ; but in the meantime, his detective propensities incited him to get a little information, in a careless sort of way, out of the lady. Naturally, he spoke of the Continent, as he passed the greater portion of his time there.

‘Mademoiselle knows Paris, as a matter of course?’

‘But very little,’ replied Mathilde. ‘I was but a child when my father died, and I have not been much in Paris since.’

‘Ah!’ said Earlsfort, ‘I recollect when I was a boy in Paris with my father—some years ago now—there was an old General la Fitte, a veteran. I wonder if he was any relation to mademoiselle?’

‘*C’était mon père,*’ said Mathilde’s soft voice.

‘Your father!—Le Général la Fitte your father! Impossible!’

‘It is nevertheless true,’ she answered, laughing. ‘He married my mother, who was an Englishwoman, and died when I was very young, leaving me his blessing and a thousand francs a year.’

Earlsfort was at his wits’ end. Could he be mistaken after all? At all events, now that he had a clue to the lady’s parentage, it would not be so difficult to learn something about her. He had not expected she would have owned so readily to any of her antecedents. Yet Mathilde had not betrayed herself ; she knew every inquiry ingenuity could devise might be made in Paris for Mademoiselle la Fitte. She had left Paris when very young, and had been married for the last eight years ; thus it was not very likely Captain Earlsfort would obtain much information about her.

She was beginning to think he was almost as sharp as she was, and agreeable as was the time passed in his society, yet she almost regretted he had ever come there. Her hold over Sir Henry was not yet quite strong enough to admit of any little side-winds of slander coming in between them. As for attempting to bewitch Dick Earlsfort, that she felt to be utterly useless.

They were standing by a small gate, now, leading from the grounds into the village, waiting for Sir Henry, who had crossed over to the post-office to inquire for letters by the second post. Mathilde contemplated Earlsfort as he stood leaning against the rails; and he, his dissipated-looking wide-awake slightly on one side, which gave him a very insolent, self-satisfied appearance, returned her gaze with interest. A struggle between those two would be on very equal terms, but Mathilde seemed inclined to hold back, as though she were half afraid of undertaking it. In the course of a few minutes Sir Henry returned, with an open letter in his hand. He was evidently in a state of great agitation.

‘From Lady Ida,’ he said, addressing Earlsfort, ‘with a P.S. from Georgie. Clive is in trouble of some sort, and they want me to set him right.’

Dick Earlsfort whistled as he held out his hand for the letter. He read it through, and then looked up. His eye rested for a moment on Mathilde! she was pale as death. He, however, made no observation, save to ask Sir Henry when he was going to town.

‘This afternoon,’ was the answer. ‘Poor little Georgie! I promised to stand her friend, and I will do my best for her.’

So the party walked quickly back to the house, only few words being spoken the while. Everyone seemed absorbed by their own thoughts, save Glory, and she was rather bewildered. She did not quite comprehend what it all meant.

‘Out of Scylla into Charybdis—this is about the jolliest mess I have seen for some time!’ muttered Earlsfort, talking to himself, as he rattled his things together, preparatory to accompanying his friend to town. ‘I wonder how all this will end? That French mademoiselle, with the eyes, is very leery, I make no doubt, but I will be upsides with her yet. I am bothered if I don’t think she is mixed up in some mysterious way with that fellow Clive. She is not spoony enough



CHAPTER XIX.

FRIENDLY INTERFERENCE.

DRESSED in the daintiest of toilettes, pretty Georgie is seated in the drawing-room in Lady Ida's house in Mayfair. She looks quite herself now, bright and saucy. The depression produced by her residence in those dirty lodgings has worn away ; but Georgie, during her short matrimonial career, has already discovered that vagabondage may be very pleasing under some circumstances, but, to make it so, it must be a vagabondage well gilt ; and she is in no way sorry to exchange those poverty-stricken quarters for her mother's comfortable house.

'Oswald need never upbraid me now for being a burden to him,' thought the young lady with satisfaction, as she lolled back in an easy-chair and toyed with a bit of fragile woman's work : 'we shall have plenty of money as long as mamma lives ; and when she dies—well, I suppose something will cast up. Anyhow, I am not going to fret, and it is my full intention to make the best of life. Visitors at this time of the morning !—I wonder who on earth it is ? Sir Henry Wilbraham, I am delighted to see you. How good of you to come !'

'I did not know you were here. I expected to find Lady Ida,' said the Baronet, hesitatingly, looking rather foolish over this unexpected meeting with the lady of his love.

'How rude you are ! But then you always were a bear ; I suppose you go on the principle that "virtue is, like a rich stone, best plain set," so you leave your manners rough and unpolished, to show off your superiority over other people.'

'Not in the least changed,' he said, half to himself, as he held her hand, and looked, with a sort of pitying expression into her face.

'Changed !—why should I be changed ? Getting what

they want does not generally change people, unless, by-the-way, it makes them more saucy.'

'Fulfilled wishes do not always realise anticipation. God grant you may have no cause for regret!' was the grave answer.

'Pooh! pooh! I shall get intensely angry if you have come here to prophesy evil. With Oswald for a husband, and you for a friend, I shall do very well, never fear. You have not forgotten the old promise that you will stand my friend, have you?'

'It is the recollection of that promise which brings me here to-day, to do what I can to help your husband.'

'Hurrah! Sir Henry—you are a trump! You are conferring a favour on me, too; for, to tell you the truth, Oswald is very grumpy over the state of his affairs, and as a man in the blues is my aversion, we shall take to quarrelling soon if something be not done to cure him of the dismals.'

'What do you wish me to do?'

'Well, you see, I have rather trusted to your well-established position to back him up. That little mistake he made in Paris, poor dear, has followed him, I am sadly afraid, and it annoys and galls him to be suspected of dishonesty. Now, if you would take him by the hand for a time, this little breeze would soon blow over, and he would be able to hold his own again.'

Sir Henry stared at her for a minute or two in a vacant sort of way.

'Georgie,' he said, calmly, 'do you know what you are asking? You are as well aware as I am what this man you have chosen to marry is, and yet you expect me to condone all his former offences, and introduce him to society as my bosom friend!'

'He is my husband,' was her only answer.

'Unfortunately, and therefore I am afraid you will have to suffer for his shortcomings.'

'Then, you refuse to assist him to retrieve the past, so that my future may be brighter and calmer.'

'I will do what I can to help him, for your sake. But even you can scarcely ask me to stand god-father to a man who is entirely without integrity or honour. I should only blacken my own reputation, without being of the slightest real benefit to him. If I thought this late dark business was his only offence, the case might be different; but it is useless

to disguise the truth from you—he has been for years a confirmed gambler, and, on more than one occasion, has been detected in very unscrupulous manœuvring.’

‘I know he plays. I have known that ever since I first made his acquaintance ; but I do not believe that he cheats. He is the victim of a set of wretches, who want to make him out bad to shield themselves.’

‘Do you think you could get a promise from him that he will never put himself in the way of temptation by touching a card or a dice-box again?’

‘I will not ask him to do such a thing. He says it is his only means of subsistence.’

‘Georgie, Georgie, you surely must be very ignorant of the depths of infamy into which a love of play drags a man, and of the horrors which must await you as a professed gambler’s wife, or you would not talk thus coolly, as if you rather encouraged it than otherwise.’

‘It does not affect me as seriously as it does you ; but then, you see, I am not such a saint as you are. I am not sure I should not like the excitement of a little play myself—in fact, Oswald suggested yesterday that, if this turmoil be kept up against him, I should go to the tables next Spring, and play for him.’

‘Good heavens !’ cried Sir Henry, ‘has it come to this?’ Georgie burst out laughing.

‘You are a terrible old Puritan,’ she said. ‘Other women, socially as good as I am, play. Why should not I?’

‘Because other people choose to go utterly and entirely to the bad, is no reason why you should follow their example, I presume. If you are going to encourage your husband in the evil courses which have brought him to the pass in which he now is, it is utterly useless for me or anyone else to attempt to help him.’

‘I am sure I don’t want to encourage him in doing anything wrong,’ said Georgie with a little shake. ‘Don’t be down on me so very sharply. If I were to preach to Oswald all day long, as you would do, he would take to drinking, or some worse vice, to forget me. I cried for a fortnight over the state of affairs when I discovered how bad they were, and it only provoked him ; now I intend to laugh, whatever comes.’

Sir Henry shook his head sadly.

‘This is very terrible!’ he said. ‘I must consult Earlsfort and one or two friends, and see what can be done for your husband. Perhaps if we were to get him some appointment, it might keep him straight for awhile. Is there anything hanging over him besides these gambling suspicions—any debts or——’

Sir Henry stopped. He was not sure how far Georgie’s knowledge of her husband’s affairs might reach, and he would not for worlds have needlessly pained her.

‘Oh! I know what you mean—about that boy. Of course you will contradict that story. Oswald knows nothing whatever about the boy.’

‘I thought he had the charge of him.’

‘That was his misfortune. A wretched woman, whom I dread more than all these troubles put together, is mixed up with the business in some way, how, I have not discovered. Oswald told me once to ask her where he was, but I would rather never know than be compelled to look on that hateful woman’s face again,’ and Georgie got very excited.

‘Who is she? Where is she to be found?’

‘Where she is to be found I know not. Her name is Madame d’Aubigné. The only time I ever saw her was at Mrs. Baird’s. Sir Henry, if ever the crime of murder is added to my other sins, that woman will be the victim.’

‘Hush, hush! pray do not talk so wildly. In what way has that woman offended you?’

‘Don’t ask, don’t ask,’ she said. ‘My suspicions may be unfounded. He may not be to blame—I will not think he is—but she—oh! I should like to see her lying dead at my feet!’

‘Georgie, I cannot listen to this sort of talk; let us hope that what you insinuate does not exist. Rely on my friendship, and promise me that, if any new difficulties arise, you will let me know. In the meantime, I will see what can be done to put things on a better footing, though I fear me, poor child, your life will not be a bed of roses.’

‘What a dear old croak you are! Never mind; if you help the lame dogs over the stile, you shall have your grumble over their having lamed themselves unnecessarily. Now, do you think people are any happier, Sir Henry, for fidgeting themselves into a fever, and sighing their hearts away over the miseries that arise? For my part, I think it

is a mistake. There is that dear, good mother of mine ; she wears her life out groaning over trifles. The whole of this morning she has been fretting and fuming because the housemaid has knocked the head off a Dresden woman. It is useless for me to tell her it will stick together, and look as well as ever. "The intrinsic value is diminished," she says. Such twaddle ! I should think myself as valuable as ever if I broke my leg and had it mended.'

Sir Henry was obliged to smile, though he was grieved the while over Georgie's total want of seriousness and sensitiveness. She seemed as thoroughly unappreciative of the beauties in art and nature as she was untouched by regret at those dark spots in Clive's character, the very thought of which would have crushed many women with a weight of shame. But Georgie did not seem to care in the least what people either said or thought, as long as no inconvenience arose from Clive's delinquencies, and all could be bright and jolly.

'You certainly do not inherit Lady Ida's talent for fidgeting over trifles, or grave matters either,' said her companion.

'No, nor have I borrowed any of your distinctive quality. I don't sit down and anticipate calamities months before they arise. Is it not a blessing, all things considered ?'

'I am hardly prepared to answer that question in the affirmative. If——'

'Stop ! I can imagine all you are going to say, so leave the sermon for some other time.'

'Well, I am afraid it will not make much impression. Do you wish me to see your husband before I go ?'

'No, certainly not. He is in a savage humour this morning, smoking tobacco by the pound, and swearing volubly over the hard lines which compel him to forego his old haunts. You and he would probably quarrel if you met just now. He has got it into his head that you were once spoony about me.'

'Then, perhaps, I had better not come here any more ; but, recollect, you sent for me,' and Sir Henry bridled up and looked annoyed.

'Don't be a fool, my good friend ; come as often as you like. Oswald will get out of his tantrums when he has something else to amuse him. Ask him to dinner to meet a

friend or two, so that he may feel he is not quite sent to Coventry, and he will be all right.'

And Sir Henry took his departure, anything but pleased at his interview with Georgie. He was beyond measure annoyed as he thought over what was expected of him. Clive was a man he personally disliked. He loathed his vices, and regarded him as a sneaking coward, who was ready to creep back into society again under shelter of his wife's connections, and who, when he got there, would probably recommence his old propensities, and turn out a greater blackguard than ever. Yet Sir Henry could not refuse Georgie. This little, spoiled, wayward beauty had got herself into an abyss of trouble through her wilfulness, and he must try to help her to the best of his power. Mathilde, for the time, was forgotten. As long as Georgie wanted Sir Henry, or anything on earth could be done for Georgie, he did not trouble himself about other women; though, as he walked slowly through the streets in the direction of his club, he did think that the day might come when the society of that charming, sympathising Mademoiselle la Fitte might be a comfort to Georgie. Then Earlsfort's warning rose in his mind.

'Confound that fellow! I wish he had held his tongue. I am sure I have quite enough to worry me just now, without having my mind filled with baseless suspicions.'

However, irritated as he was against Dick Earlsfort, his first inquiry on entering his club was to ask if he was there. Sir Henry felt himself rather perplexed over the management of these affairs; and, whatever Earlsfort might be, he would at least give him credit for *nous*.

As soon as her visitor had taken his departure, Georgie dashed into the room where Clive was seated, as usual amid clouds of smoke.

'I presume your lover has gone, since you see fit to come here,' he said, testily.

Georgie stamped her foot.

'What a bear you are! If anyone had told me, a few weeks back, that you would have turned out so ill-tempered and cantankerous, I should not have believed them. Here have I been humbling myself for the last half-hour before Sir Henry Wilbraham, simply to get him to help and befriend

you, and my only thanks are vile insinuations ! If he be my lover, all I can say is so much the better for you.'

'Well, what is he going to do, after all this talk ?'

'Try to make you respectable—no easy matter either, I expect.'

'The deuce he is !—and may I ask how he intends to begin ? Is he going to send some of the Society for the Reformation of Morals here to preach ? By Jove ! "two archbishops and a martyr to boot" would never succeed in screwing me up to Wilbraham's pitch of sanctity.'

'You are about right ; nothing short of a miracle would make a saint of you. Sir Henry is not going to attempt anything so impossible ; he is going to try to get you an appointment.'

'Very kind, indeed, of him ; but I shall not accept it, should he succeed,' said Clive, coolly, between the puffs of his cigar. 'If you think I am going to spend the remainder of my life between the four walls of a dirty office, to please either you or Wilbraham, you are mistaken ! Sit on a high stool all day with a ledger before me, adding up columns of figures—faugh ! I would rather have a halter round my neck, and swing from the gallows.'

'That is right,' said Georgie, laughing ; 'settle it straight off, before you know anything about it. He might get you the appointment of hangman ; perhaps that would be more congenial to your tastes.'

'D—n his appointments !—I don't want any of them. I won't have that fellow coming here, prating about work and respectability. I hate work, and I don't intend to begin making a slave of myself now.'

'No ; you would rather be a pauper, and live on your wife. I believe you only married me because you thought mamma had some money.'

'You had better be silent on that subject, I should think, Mrs. Clive. Did you not throw yourself in my arms, and swear you would not leave me ? I am sure I did not ask you to come.'

'Oh ! Oswald, what an ungrateful wretch you are, after all I have done for you ! But there, I don't want to praise myself, only let me tell you I mean to lead a jolly life, and totally disregard your ill-temper. You may sit here and swear, and rage yourself into a fit, if you like. I am going

out in the carriage. I should advise you to come, too ; but you need not, unless you choose.'

'Where are you going?'

'To some shops, and to make a few calls. Come along, old man, let us play a spoony couple for once, and astonish the natives ; such animals are rare after matrimony in these days, you know.'

Clive's ill-temper relaxed somewhat, and tossing his half-finished cigar out of the window, he prepared to accompany his wife. Georgie was radiant ; she was going to exhibit her husband to a few particular friends, and she was just like a child with a new toy. There were a good many storm-clouds floating about on the horizon of her married life ; but they did not frighten her in the least. As long as Clive was in a good humour and talkative, she prattled with and petted him ; when he was cross and disagreeable, which was not unfrequently the case, she was quite as ready to quarrel as he was. She loved him after her own fashion ; but then the power of loving had not been very strongly developed in Georgie's nature. La Rochefoucauld says 'that there are many people in the world who would never have been in love if they had never heard talk of it,' and Georgie very probably was one of these people.

So the husband and wife went out together. Lady Ida had a literary *r union*, which prevented her from driving that afternoon ; and before she started, Georgie had the satisfaction of showing herself to her mother's guests, and receiving their congratulations. With her old friend the poet she was especially amused, as with downcast eyes and a voice filled with tears, he sighed forth his hope that a life of happiness awaited her.

'To Lady Bowyer's,' was the order given by Georgie when they were seated in the carriage.

'Good heavens ! you are surely not going to see that horrid, stiff old cat ? If calling on that sort of people is what you mean when you talk of leading a jolly life, by Jove ! you must be easily satisfied.'

'A small *coup d' tat*, Oswald, which will lead eventually to some fun.'

'Not much fun to be got out of that old party. Why, she is the antiquity who used to take you out, and object to your dancing with me?'

‘The same. But as I have before told you that it is necessary occasionally to illuminate Old Nick, so we are going to shine with full effulgence on Aunt Sophy.’

Her ladyship was at home, and Georgie danced into the room in a very unmatronly fashion, followed by Oswald, looking very glum, and rather foolish. Before the old lady could draw herself up with dignified severity, as she would probably have done had she had time for preparation, Georgie had thrown herself on the top of her, and was hugging and kissing her in a most demonstrative style.

‘Are you not glad to see me again, aunty mine? Why, it is an age since we met. I have brought Oswald to make your acquaintance. Only fancy wild Georgie having become a staid, sober, married woman.’

Lady Bowyer icily extended the tips of her fingers to Clive, and returned Georgie’s gushing caresses by a cold kiss on her forehead.

‘Now look here, aunty,’ said the young lady, placing both her hands on her aunt’s shoulders as she stood over her, while she sat on a low chair, ‘I did not come here to be snubbed—it is a process I hate; but I am not going away till you have called me a dear child, as you used to do, and have shaken hands most cordially with my husband. I know you love me very much, because I have tried your patience to the utmost very frequently, and you have always forgiven me. I have been very wilful and very disobedient—granted; but then look what a dear he is, and recollect that I should pine and die if I did not have my own way, so now say you will forgive me, like a dear, good Aunt Soph,’ and she knelt on the footstool at the old lady’s feet, and looked up at her pleadingly.

‘You silly child, why did you not stay at home, instead of coming here to make a fool of me?’

‘There, it is all right. I knew you would forgive me. Mamma is not very angry—why should you be?’

‘Your mother was always too indulgent to you, or you would be a better child. Oh! Georgie, Georgie, you are very troublesome and wilful; but such as you are, I suppose your friends must make the best of you. As for you, sir,’ she said, turning to Clive, ‘I don’t think I shall forgive you quite so readily. It was not the action of a gentleman to carry off our pet lamb without permission. The poor child

was young ; but you ought to have known better. I shall withhold my hand in forgiveness until I have seen from my own observation whether you are worthy of this wayward little girl. If she be happy, well, I shall have no cause to dislike you. Come both of you and dine with me to-morrow, and then we can get better acquainted.'

The invitation was cordially accepted by Georgie ; but Clive looked out of place and uncomfortable, and scarcely spoke during the whole of the visit. Once more in the carriage, Georgie set up one of her ringing, hearty laughs.

'What the devil are you laughing at?' asked her husband. 'I declare you will drive me mad with your fooleries.'

'At your discomfiture, and my own success, you dear, savage old pet !'

'Now, look here, Georgie, I will stand no more of this. Just give a fellow notice when you are going to pay any more of these visits, and I will get out and walk.'

'It would not have been of any use to go without you, *mon ami*. The old lady would have scolded me and abused you. I meant you should be let in for this interview, sooner or later ; and I am so glad it is over, and has been successful, too.'

'What on earth was the benefit of it ?'

'Money, my dear Oswald, money. Upon my word, I am becoming so practical since I married, I scarcely know myself. I am beginning so thoroughly to appreciate the meaning of the word "coin."'

Clive laughed.

'And is that old lady endowed with a superabundance of the article ?'

'Just so ; and a little bird whispered to me once that she meant to leave it all to me. Don't you see now that it was a stroke of policy to endure an unpleasant interview for a few minutes? Not that it was disagreeable to me. I thought it rather fun.'

'Georgie, you would make a capital actress.'

'So I have told you more than once. If we do not see our way clearly to Aunt Sophy's money, we will give the subject serious consideration.'



CHAPTER XX.

I TOLD YOU SO.

THE irrepressible Sally is intent in conversation with the baker at Mrs. Baird's area-gate ; but her eloquence is brought to a sudden stop by the arrival of a hansom cab at the door of her mistress's

house.

'Lawks-a-mussy, here's more swell visitors for missis !' And, regardless of her friend the baker's vacant stare of astonishment, she runs off to let in the new comer. This time it was a gentleman—not one of the seedy denizens of Bohemia, Sally had learnt to know full well, but a refined, elegant-looking man, who, to use Sally's expression, 'did not look as if he had ever brushed his own hair or washed his own hands for hisself in his life.'

She showed him into the little dingy front parlour, and then burst in on her mistress, who was, as usual, deep in the 'Rights of Women,' with 'Oh! missis, here's such a lord says he must have a talk with yer at once—he won't keep yer long.'

Having succeeded in bringing her mistress back from the theory she was dreaming over, to the realities of actual life, Mrs. Baird went into the adjoining room, to grant Dick Earlsfort (for he it was) the interview he had demanded.

When Sir Henry Wilbraham consulted Earlsfort about Clive's affairs, he had not failed to give him a full account of all he had learnt from Georgie ; and it was entirely on his own responsibility, and unknown to Sir Henry, that, after giving the matter due consideration during several weeks, he made up his mind to seek out Mrs. Baird. He was, as we already know, rather detective in his propensities.

Unprepared for the peculiar appearance which the Yankee widow personally presented, he could scarcely

refrain from laughing when she entered the room. Her hair was dragged well off her face, Chinese fashion, and rolled up in a ball at the top of her head, her hard, large features thus standing out in strong relief ; nor was one single attempt made by feminine art to ornament or subdue her gaunt, forbidding frame. She had evidently not made those thousand and one little mysteries her study, in the use of which modern society so freely indulges, '*pour réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage.*'

'Not favoured by the gods, as far as body goes. It is to be hoped they have done more for her mind. Why, she looks like one of the Furies themselves,' thought Earlsfort, as he bowed courteously, and asked her if she would kindly answer a few questions he wished to put relative to her missing nephew.

'The old subject !' she growled. 'I wish to goodness the boy was found! I have already wasted more of my precious time talking about him than he is worth. But pray be seated, sir ; we will go over the ground again, if you wish, though I should like to know first what you have to do with it?'

'Fury in more than outward form,' was Earlsfort's mental comment ; but he said, civilly, 'I have no personal interest in the matter, but on account of the young lady he has lately married, I am anxious, if possible, to free Mr. Clive from some uncomfortable suspicions which seem to be hanging over him anent that boy.'

'I am not the person to help you,' she said sternly, 'for I believe the very worst of this Clive. A man who presumes to take charge of a young boy, allows him to go off no one knows whither, and then coolly refuses to give any information as to where he is likely to be found, is, to say the least, very reprehensible. The training of the young is, my dear sir, a very grave and serious undertaking, which no man should engage in, unless he be fully competent to lead each latent virtue towards perfection, and by his own example to ennoble and refine. Aristotle tells us that "a statue lies hid in a block of marble, and is brought to light and form by means of the sculptor's chisel ;" so is education the chisel which moulds and models the mind.'

'My dear, good lady,' suggested Earlsfort, who was by no means willing to listen to Mrs. Baird's strictures on

education, 'if this be all of which this fellow Clive is guilty—reprehensible though I agree with you that it is—yet I think we must let him off. He has but followed in the wake of many others. I had imagined the charges against him were far graver.'

"'Οι πολλοι κακοι," to quote a saying of Bias. Is that any reason why this man should escape the contempt—the scorn which he so richly deserves?'

'What little Greek I ever knew I left at school,' said Earlsfort, laughing. 'You will doubtless think me a very illiterate member of society, and I assure you I feel humiliated; but I am afraid it is too late in the day now to begin serious study, so please spare me the contempt incidental to my ignorance.'

'It is never too late to learn wisdom,' was the short answer.

'Perhaps not, unless, alas! one is constitutionally a fool; but we are wandering from our point amid these dissertations, and I am wasting your precious time. It seems from information I have gained, that there was a woman mixed up in this mysterious business—a woman, too, who, I hear, is not unknown to you—one d'Aubigné. She has lately disappeared from London. Can you tell me where to find her?'

The old lady gasped convulsively, and caught Captain Earlsfort roughly by the hand.

'She—Madame d'Aubigné—had anything to do with my nephew's disappearance! You are dreaming, sir; or have you come here to mystify and perplex me? If so, it is not the action of a gentleman.'

'I assure you I have no ulterior motive but to establish the truth,' said Earlsfort; 'but I must say I am rather astonished to find that Madame d'Aubigné is an intimate associate of yours. There is a screw loose somewhere, and I fear you are the victim.'

'How—what do you mean?'

'You are evidently not aware, my dear Mrs. Baird, that this Madame d'Aubigné is a professed gambler, and has been an *habituée* of the foreign gaming-tables for some time past.'

'This cannot be true; you must be mistaking her for some one else.'

'No, indeed, I think you will find it is the same. She had lately a villa at Twickenham, and has a devoted old fol-

lower called Jerome, who does all her dirty work for her. She was at Spa when the boy disappeared, and I believe Clive says she can account for him ; but then the question is where has she gone ? The house at Twickenham is to let, and both she and Jerome have disappeared. Can you give any information on the subject ?'

Mrs. Baird's leather-coloured features grew livid.

'What have I done !—what have I done !' she gasped.
'Oh, woe is me !—woe is me !'

'Pray do not agitate yourself thus, but tell me what has happened, and let me help you, if it be possible.'

'I have been the means of destroying everlastingly a young, untutored mind, by introducing this woman as its guardian ! Oh ! my dear sir, how futile and fallacious is all reliance placed in the integrity and honour of humanity !'

'Poor human nature, don't sweep it down into the depths of the bottomless pit with one flourish of your besom,' said Earlsfort, laughing ; 'but tell me in what this one particular specimen has deceived you ?'

'It is no laughing matter, to me at least,' answered Mrs. Baird with acerbity, 'to know that this person has, through my instrumentality, got a situation in a family of position—and under a false name too,' she almost screamed.

Poor Mrs. Baird, she had always had her scruples about Mathilde's alias.

'So, so,' said Earlsfort, looking very knowing as he wedged his chair closer to his antique companion. 'La Fitte, is it not ? Am I far wrong ?'

Mrs. Baird nodded her head in acquiescence. She seemed too angry to speak, but sat rocking herself backwards and forwards with a sort of half-savage, half-rueful expression on her face ; at which Dick Earlsfort felt very much inclined to laugh heartily. In proportion as the scale of her self-respect had gone down, his had risen, and he was in high good-humour with himself for his acuteness and readiness of observation.

'Pray don't annoy yourself thus my dear lady,' he said patronisingly, 'there is no great harm done. The people with whom Madamè d'Aubigné has taken up her abode are intimate friends of mine. I will speedily have the matter set right without any great fuss. But, my dear Mrs. Baird, do let it be a lesson to you in the future. Ladies who devote them-

selves to the study of the dead languages with your zest, are scarcely competent to unravel the substantial real workings of every-day life.'

'Pardon me, my dear sir, but philosophy is the study which gives us a knowledge of moral obligations, and teaches us to understand the intricate workings of the mind. Why, you will surely give Bacon credit for a deep and perfect knowledge of human nature, and he was one of the greatest philosophers of whom England can boast.'

'My knowledge of philosophy, my dear Mrs. Baird, is confined to the opera of *Faust*, and uncomfortable visions of a little black dog, so please do not put me through any examination on the point. We men of the world, without being "besprent with learned dust," as a certain Pope you probably wot of, has it, knock about and pick up a good deal of information nevertheless.'

'She was so gentle, so ladylike, so well informed; how could I for a moment imagine she lacked truth—truth, which is the basis of everything pure and noble in humanity.'

'You forget she is an adventuress, and to humbug is her trade. Let it be a consolation for you to know that you are not the only person she has blinded.'

'Beautiful in body! deformed in mind! How mysterious are the workings of the Creator.'

Captain Earlsfort rose. He had had about enough of this interview. Moralising and philosophising were not exactly in his line; and, having got the missing link in his chain of evidence, he did not care to prolong his visit.

'One moment, sir, before you go. That marriage to which you alluded—how will it turn out? I have not seen Lady Ida since her return from Paris.'

'That remains to be proved,' answered Earlsfort. 'They are early days as yet to give an opinion. Small means do not generally promote matrimonial bliss.'

'Certainly not. As the great Bacon hath it, "He who preferreth Helena, quitteth the gifts of Juno and Pallas."'

'Exactly so; but in this instance I doubt if our friend Clive would have received any gifts from those great divinities, even if he had forsworn Miss Georgie. It is altogether a strange business. Don't you think you could make a novel out of it, my dear Mrs. Baird?'

'I should be sorry to waste my time over anything so

frivolous and debasing. The moral standard to which I would fain see the intellectual powers of the age attain, will never be reached by such means. Novel-writing, my dear sir, is one of the vehicles of the present day for encouraging vicious inclinations.'

'Don't agree with you in the very least,' answered Earlsfort. 'People read novels to amuse themselves, and if they have a good tendency, of course they influence for good. Granted many of the novels which come out are sensationally immoral, but I trust they are the exceptions. As for your treatises and pamphlets, why, nine-tenths of mankind throw them into the fire without reading them. No, it won't do to go in for dryness and abstruseness—it nauseates rather than improves. You write a clever novel; mind you make it a little thrilling, though. I will get it asked for at the clubs.'

And he made a graceful exit, leaving that pleasing impression on Mrs. Baird, which the occasional visit of a young, good-looking man usually does on ladies who have been for some time in 'the sere and yellow leaf.' So Dick Earlsfort jumped into the hansom, and was driven quickly back to his Club.

'Of all the hideous sounds of woe,
Worse than the screech-owl and the blast,
Is that portentous one—I told you so!'

he exclaimed, as he gave Sir Henry Wilbraham a friendly slap on the back. 'Now, don't cut up rusty, old fellow, for, by Jove! I cannot help it.'

'Help what? What the deuce are you talking about?'

'It is as I suspected—your new friend is all wrong—Madame d'Aubigné, in fact.'

'What do you mean? Do stop these enigmas, Dick. Who is Madame d'Aubigné?'

'Why, the Frenchwoman who is comfortably domesticated by your fireside. Hal, my boy, excuse me for the remark, but it strikes me forcibly you have been made a fool of.'

'What are you talking about? I am completely at a loss to understand.'

'Very sorry for your intellect. Well, I must see if I can hammer a little comprehension into you. Miss Fane's com-

panion, that fascinating and delightful creature you are so gone about, has taken up her quarters in your establishment under a feigned name, and is none other than Madame d'Aubigné, one of the reigning divinities of the German watering-places. She had to bolt last season in rather an undignified fashion, some fellow having blown his brains out owing to her small machinations. I presume that is the reason she has sought a refuge at Brinck Hall.'

'Good heavens ! Earlsfort, do you mean all this ?'

'Perfectly true, Hal. I thought that woman was not quite on the square, but, by Jove ! I did not know she was Madame d'Aubigné. Now, if I had remained in civilised regions instead of paying Mormon visits, in all probability I should have been better acquainted with my lady's features.'

'Well, I am astonished,' said Sir Henry, who certainly looked very much amazed and perplexed.

'Of course you are. Fancy a saint like you being taken with an animal of that sort ! Confound it, you will be the chaff of London if it gets abroad. Send her away quietly, Hal. Mum is the word as far as I am concerned.'

'My mother engaged her,' suggested Sir Henry, meekly.

'Very probably. How should she know ? It is a way old ladies have, to be ignorant of what is going on in the world. I say, old boy. I don't want to twit you, but you were spoony on her.'

'A little fascinated for the time, perhaps. You will own, I suppose, that she is not wanting in beauty ?'

Earlsfort laughed.

'It is my private opinion that you sanctimonious, steady-going fellows are knocked over by a pretty face far sooner than those who profess less wisdom and sobriety. But to business. This young woman must have her *congé*, and the question is how it is to be done neatly.'

'I will go down this afternoon, tell her what I have heard, and have an explanation with her.'

'My dear Hal, what a duffer you are ! She will immediately get up a scene, raise the whole house, and scandalise the entire county. Above all, too, I think it is very desirable that, if possible, Miss Fane should be kept unacquainted with this history. Why should her young innocence be tainted by the knowledge that this woman she has lived so near and liked, is an intriguing adventuress, an unscrupulous gambler ?'

Sir Henry looked up inquiringly at Earlsfort.

'Yes, it is true, Hal. I am a little taken in that quarter. The innocent sweetness of that child touches me far more than all your fascinating, dashing d'Aubignés. I have come across too many of them in my life.'

'Well, what is to be done?' asked Sir Henry, somewhat testily. 'I wish all this miserable business was over. But look here, Dick, if what you say be true, why should she give up the pleasures and amusements of life to settle down quietly in our humdrum country corner? Depend upon it she is tired of adventure, and regrets the past. It is unkind and unchristian to be too severe on her.'

'Want of means, and an idea that she had better remain quiet till the storm has blown over, are her reasons for inflicting her presence on you, I should imagine. I know there was some fearful row at Spa last season; but I am not up in the particulars—some fellow shot himself in the *mêlée*, I believe.'

'It was not the boy Baird!'

'Oh! no, some Frenchman—Berthel, or some such name. Clive was mixed up in the story, though. I am not astonished that Mrs. Clive hates this woman, for she and Clive have no doubt concocted a good many devilish schemes together.'

'Well, what do you advise me to do? I certainly wish she was away from Brinck Hall; but I am afraid I have placed myself in rather a false position. Madame d'Aubigné has, I presume, every right to be treated as a lady, till some of this chicanery has been proved against her; and I do not wish to get into any mess for actionable insinuations.'

'You are rather in a hat, I own. But money gets people out of most difficulties. Send her a cheque, for her instructions to Miss Fane. I won't say for how much—but for a quarter's salary, I should think; and neatly suggest that you should like some information relative to the mysterious disappearance of young Baird. Insinuate that you are acquainted with her real name. My knowledge of humanity is at a discount if the little bird does not instantly take flight in search of some snigger roost. She will make her own excuses to your home-party; and you will know nothing farther of the matter, save what a certain entry in your banker's book will tell you.'



CHAPTER XXI.

A VISIT OF CHARITY.

DILLON is working away as usual in his small comfortable studio, and old Sternheim, now well enough to leave his bed, is sitting crouched over the fire, warming his hands at intervals, in a helpless, childish way, while he talks quietly to himself in German. Madame d'Aubigné suddenly stood on the threshold of the door, and looked at them both with those large, fascinating eyes of hers. Dillon uttered an ejaculation of surprise, and the old German started to his feet for a second ; then he gave a little cry, and covering his face with his hands, sank down again into his chair.

‘One would think you had both seen a ghost,’ said Mathilde, laughing. ‘Is it so very strange that I should pay you a visit? I have been in the country for some months, or I should not have neglected asking after Mr. Sternheim for so long. I trust he is better.’ And she walked up to him, and removing his hands from his face, gazed at him long and earnestly. He lay passively back in his arm-chair, and did not even make an effort to move. Dillon looked on in silence. There was something strange, almost phantom-like, in the sudden appearance of this woman, and in the unspoken power she seemed to be exercising over the old German philosopher, which made Dillon watch her as though spell-bound. At last she released her hold of Sternheim’s hands, and rubbed her eyes, as though they ached from the long steadfast gaze she had bestowed on him. ‘Yes, it were well,’ she said softly to herself as she turned and smiled on Dillon. ‘My welcome?—where is it? What have I done to forfeit it? You seem petrified.’

‘My dear madam, I am very pleased to see you,’ he stammered.

‘Well, you do not look so. Ah! Mr. Dillon, I see how it is—some one has been poisoning your mind against me. I had hoped you would have been my friend, and that you would not have taken a part in the calumnies the world in general is always ready to cast at a woman whenever she attempts to stand alone and work an independence for herself without a male protector. If M. d’Aubigné were in his right mind, and by my side, no one would dare to breathe a word against me; but because it has pleased Providence to afflict him, I am trampled on and reviled by everyone. What have I done, I should like to know, that hundreds of other women of high birth have not done too?—but then their husbands were by their sides to countenance them. True, I have played at the foreign gaming-tables; but who has not done the same? And is it not my misery, rather than my fault, that I have no protector—I may say no friend—in this vast world, but an octogenarian soldier? And God alone knows how long he may be spared to me.’

She finished the sentence amid loud sobs.

A woman in tears was too much for soft-hearted old Dillon, and he was all devotion in a moment.

‘Dear lady, do not say you have not a friend in the world, but tell me what can I do to serve you?’ And he led her quietly to a seat.

After struggling with her emotion for some minutes, Mathilde gradually recovered.

‘I did not come here to ask for benefits,’ she said, ‘but simply to see Mr. Sternheim, in whom the thought of my own poor husband gives me an intense interest; but your cold reception overcame me. I have been hardly used lately, Mr. Dillon, and my nerves are quite unstrung. To Mrs. Baird, who was inclined to be so staunch a friend to me, I dare not go. I know not what my detractors have told her.’ And she looked inquiringly at Dillon.

‘She is very bitter and angry at the deception she thinks has been practised on her.’

‘Good heavens! what deception? I am Madame d’Aubigné, the wife of a French gentleman, the daughter of a French general. I left my husband because his imbecility took a brutal turn, and I could not stay with him. As long as my money lasted, I wandered about the Continent, with my faithful old servant, for my amusement. When it came

to an end, I tried to obtain more by my own personal efforts in the path of honest industry. All this Mrs. Baird knew. How then could she have been deceived? I ask again, Mr. Dillon, what have I done to merit this treatment?’

‘In this country, gambling, especially for women, is esteemed a vice,’ said Dillon, looking down, as though he feared the vials of her wrath would be emptied on him next.

‘It is strange, then, that English ladies think it no sin to be seen at the foreign gambling-tables. Some of them play pretty highly too. But even for those who do not play themselves, it is surely an anomaly for them to countenance by their presence, when abroad, a practice which they condemn with so much severity in their own country. I had been told the English were kind, charitable, and benevolent; during my sojourn in your land I have not realised the truth of this. Money is the god before which you English bow; let a man be as sensual, as vicious as he pleases, it covers every sin; but woe to the poor wretch who has it not! No term of opprobrium is too black for him; and he is mistrusted and misjudged at every turn.’

‘These are severe strictures, though, I fear, to some extent true,’ answered Dillon. ‘I know, however, but little of the matter, for I am so taken up by my profession, absorbed in my pictures, that I have no time to make investigations about the state of a society into which, in all probability, I shall never go.’

‘Ah! and here I am encroaching on your valuable time with my private griefs and selfish worries. Do go on with your painting while I talk to Mr. Sternheim a little. I wonder if he knows me?’ And she rose and leant once more over the old man’s chair, while she asked tenderly after his health.

‘Danke, danke, pretty lady—soon I shall be well. Winter is on me now—when the cold goes and Summer comes again, I shall go to my Vaterland and find him there; and Mariechen will be glad, as angels are glad in Heaven.’

‘Always on young Baird,’ said Dillon; ‘he does not seem to think of anything else.’

‘I wonder if he would know him if he saw him?’ asked Mathilde dreamily.

‘Ay, would he, or I mistake him much.’

She knelt down beside him and smoothed the white hair back off his wrinkled brow.

‘Where is Ralph?’ she asked; ‘will he come soon?’

The old man started back from her, and shook all over as though overcome with some strong emotion.

‘I have seen him!—I have seen him!’ he cried; ‘then he passed away, and it was all dark—oh, how it aches my poor head!—verwirrt, verwirrt, I can think no more!’

‘Don’t be excited,’ she said, softly; and she caressed him with her hand till he lay back tranquilly in his arm-chair once more.

Then she and Dillon watched him in silence for a few minutes.

‘What a wreck!’ said Dillon at last; ‘and to think that he was once a learned philosopher! “*Sic transit gloria mundi.*” Strange, too, that all his wisdom seems to have passed quite away—he never even alludes to any of the deep and abstruse studies in which some of his best years have been spent; but he seems to have quite returned to the innocent purity of his earliest childhood.’

Mathilde appeared lost in thought, for she did not answer; then, after a pause, she said suddenly—

‘You must spare me this old man, Mr. Dillon, for a time. I am poor, it is true, but I have more money than you have. In these small quarters he is only a burden on you. Do let me take care of him. I will tend him lovingly—to watch over him will be an object in my lone life.’

Dillon looked amazed at the proposition.

‘Lady, have you considered the charge this poor old man will entail on you?’ he said.

‘I have considered it well, and until my servant Jerome returns from France, where I have sent him on business, I cannot undertake it. But in a few days from this time all shall be prepared for him. And you, Mr. Dillon, still being his friend and mine, will be our constant visitor—will you not?—and thus assure yourself we are doing all we can to make him happy?’

‘Poor old chap! I shall be sorry to part with him,’ said Dillon; ‘but he will be better off with you; so I must not be selfish, and wish to keep him here.’

Mathilde’s motive—what was it? ‘Charity covers a multitude of sins,’ she thought; and therefore she hoped, by a

certain amount of devotedness to old Sternheim, to blind once more some of those who had lately had their eyes opened to see her short-comings. She was lonely, too, very often, and watching for and using the old man's occasional moments of lucidity might afford her a certain amount of amusement. It could also be in no way disadvantageous to have the principal instigator in the search for Ralph, a visitor in her own house.





CHAPTER XXII.

LE PETIT BON-HOMME ROUGE.

T is a bitterly cold night in Mid-winter, and some four or five men are sitting smoking and drinking together in a bright-looking little *cabaret* at P——. They are chattering in an easy, friendly style, touching but lightly on the news of the day; for politics, save in whispers, forms but a small part of a French workman's conversation, and in a public tavern, subject to the entrances and exits of men of every shade and complexion of opinion, such talk would be avoided most carefully. No, the *fêtes* of the *jour de l'an* have been over only a few days, and they are amusing each other by recounting the various little adventures and episodes which have befallen them, when a new-comer enters the house, and, seating himself at a small table, calls out to the landlord for his *petit verre*. He is a stranger to all present, and they naturally regard him with a certain amount of suspicion. Can he be an agent of police?—and each man begins to pass his conscience in review, to discover, if possible, if he has done or said anything to make himself suspected by the Imperial government. Thus the conversation does not flow as pleasantly as it did before the stranger's entrance; a sort of restraint seems to have fallen on the little party.

'You are silent, my friends,' said the new-comer—'does my presence startle you, or have the *nouvelles idées* of these modern days made Frenchmen too fine to enjoy the old noisy *camaraderie* which existed in my youth? *Tiens, mon maître,*' he said, turning to the landlord, 'how many years have you kept this house, with the sign of the "*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*?"'

'Well, let me see,' answered the man thus addressed,

drawing his fingers through his hair, 'it is close on twenty-five years. *Dieu!* it is a long time to look back on, but it will be a quarter of a century on the eve of the next *Fête-Dieu* since I took upon myself the duties of landlord here. I have weathered a good many political storms, simply by sticking to my own business, and leaving other people to look after theirs.'

'Ah! you are a fine fellow, Maître Franval. I recollect you when you were *encore un petit barbichon* in the arms of the good old *commère* Jeanne.'

'You recollect me?' and Maître Franval looked surprised, for he did not recognise his guest.

The older man nodded as he smiled complacently, and smoked away at his pipe.

'*Assez vraisemblable* that you do not remember me, *mon ami*, as it will be half a century à la *Saint Martin* since I smoked a pipe in this same room. It was not very clean then—*mais, dame! je ne crois pas qu'on l'aie fait blanchir depuis. Si, si!*' he went on talking as if to himself, 'it was the year after Waterloo—*que le diable emporte le souvenir*—that I came here to pay a flying visit to the old place. It looks much the same, but I suppose most of the old *habitués* are working their way through purgatory by this time—eh, *mon cousin?*'

'*Mon Dieu! je n'y comprends rien*, who are you?' asked the landlord, who, good worthy man though he was, had not perhaps received quite his just quota of brains. As well, perhaps, in a country where brains are not unfrequently dangerous commodities.

'Well, my grandfather was the original proprietor of the '*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*;' and now, perhaps, my good cousin Franval, if you have not floated away all your intellects in your own *vin de Bourgogne*, you will be able to come to a sort of guess of who I am.'

'*Dieu des dieux*, it is Jerome Domet!' And he rushed at him, Frenchman-like, and kissed him cordially on both cheeks. Then he went to a staircase at the back of the room, and called out lustily, 'Lucile! Philippine! *arrivez vite*, here is the long-lost cousin we thought had been killed years ago!'

Two women, the fat, good-tempered hostess, and her daughter, a bright-looking little French beauty, immediately

appeared on the scene; and Jerome, to his dismay—his hatred for women being fully considered—found himself the victim of their demonstrative embraces. This affectionate ebullition having somewhat subsided, came the questions, ‘Where have you been all these years?—and are you coming now to settle here for good?’ And there was just a shade over the good landlord’s brow as he asked them, for he suddenly recollected that Jerome had perhaps more right there than he had. But the answer quickly set his fears at rest.

‘*N’ayez pas peur, mes enfans, je ne vous dérangerai pas.* I came but to have a peep. In a few days I shall be off again.’

Then a little supper must be prepared immediately, as a welcome to this long-lost cousin, for Jerome’s father and the *commère* Jeanne had been brother and sister, so the relationship was a near one. In less than half an hour an *omelette aux herbes*, such as one rarely sees out of France, and a fragrant dish of an undefinable nature, but in which garlic decidedly preponderated, were placed on the table, together with some of the best wine the cellars of the ‘*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*’ could afford. And the evening passed merrily away. Jerome told them many a tale of his bygone life of adventure and danger. Amongst other, to them, interesting accounts, he gave them the legend of their *auberge*, now more than a hundred years old, and which, by some singular omission, had never reached the present proprietor.

‘This house,’ said Jerome, ‘was built by my grandfather pretty early in the last century, before P—— had become the large town which it now is; though P——, let me tell you, *mes amis*, has always held its head pretty high, for in those days it was the resort of men of genius and letters, who fled from the bustle of the capital to enjoy the calm and quietude of this pretty spot. Well, *le vieux grandpère* Domet built this house, and doubtless was proud of his work, though it was not so magnificent as it is now.’ And he looked round on the small dirty quarters with a smile. ‘The extensive progeniture of the *famille* Domet necessitated another *étage*. “*Suivant le bras la saignée.*” The *famille* Domet has always been prudent and careful, so *les aïeux* contented themselves with two rooms till they had turned their money over and saved enough to build again. Then came the bright idea that what had been only a *cabane*, might be raised to the rank

of a *cabaret*; and having thus decided, the next important point was to find an attractive sign. *La vieille mère*, like the rest of her sex, had a sort of *tendresse* for the *habit noir*. Strange that most women think they will get to Heaven by a little priest-worship. She suggested that the house should be dedicated to some saint, by way of bringing it luck and custom; but the *grandpère*, who was somewhat tainted by the free-thinking opinions so prevalent in those days which preceded the great Revolution, did not share his wife's devotion for *les ecclésiastiques*, and derided the idea.

"*Ces saints hommes ne boivent pas*," he remarked; "to dedicate one's *cabaret* to them would be simply to crush it."

'But *notre petite Maman* was *dévôte*; she lay awake at night; she prayed; she begged; no good would ever come to the house if the blessed saints were left out of the arrangement. Bacchus, profanely suggested by her husband, was not in her calendar, and she would none of him. In fact, from a quiet submissive woman, she became a perfect torment, and gave the poor man no peace by day, no sleep by night. Something must be done to satisfy her. Dedicate his house to a saint he would not, for P—— was the rendezvous of many *esprits forts*, and he did not wish to call down on himself the raillery of the entire neighbourhood. *Nous ne sommes pas bêtes nous autres de la famille Domet*, and the great progenitor was not wanting in *savoir-faire*. He went into Paris one fine morning, just before Christmas, and came back with a roll of paper under his arm.

"*Voici tes étrennes, chérie*," he said to his wife as he presented it.

She opened the parcel with eagerness. It was a portrait of the Cardinal ——, in the scarlet robe of his office. The good woman was overcome with pleasure.

"Hang it up in the new parlour," he said. "The Cardinal will do for patron to the house we will open on the *jour de l'an*."

'*Petite Maman* was all gratitude and delight. The beautiful *ecclésiastique* was exactly what was wanting to make her happiness complete, and the *Père Domet* was an angel of goodness to have taken her wishes into consideration. Nothing remained but to have the words "Au Cardinal" put up in large letters over the door; but in this *cette chère dame et respectable aïeule* was doomed to disappointment; for one day,

on her return from taking a little promenade with her children, she saw the sign, "Au Petit Bon-homme Rouge," emblazoned over the *hôtellerie*. In vain did she expostulate with *M. son Mari*. "Was he not a *petit bon-homme rouge*?" was the only answer she could get from him, as he rubbed his hands in exultation over having given in to his wife without making himself the laughing-stock of the village.'

Maitre Franval laughed heartily over this account, but the ladies of the party looked shocked. This newly-found cousin, they feared, was no greater saint than had been his grandfather.

Of course Jerome was invited to remain in the house of his relations for as long as he intended to honour P—— with his presence; to which he agreed with pleasure; if he had not meant to utilise them, he would scarcely have given himself the trouble to call on them.

'*Dites donc*,' said Jerome, as on the following morning he and Franval stood smoking and talking at the door. 'What is that large, dismal-looking house, closed up with shutters, at the bottom of the street? Is it a prison? There was nothing so gloomy there in my young days.'

'Ah! it is a terrible eyesore, and no mistake,' answered the landlord; 'and the shrieks and yells which come from it at times are *très agaçants*; but the officials are good customers here, so we ought not to complain.'

'It is, then—?'

'*Une maison de santé*.'

'Is it possible to get inside?'

Franval shook his head.

'*Pas facile*. There would be no mystery left about these sort of places if the public was admitted,' he said, laughing.

'Golden keys open most locks,' answered his cousin.

'True; but surely you might spend your money to more advantage than in gaining admission there. What pleasure can you find in looking at those *pauvres diables* of lunatics? For my part, I would rather go another way.'

'*Chacun à son goût, mon ami*. Now, I have a fancy to get into that dark old house, and I look to you to help me.'

'*Ça se peut sans doute*. One of the *gardes* was in here last evening when you arrived; if he should come in again to-night, we will ask him what can be done.'

‘Who is the directeur?’

‘A certain old grey-headed Docteur Dupuis. He saw a good deal of military life in his younger days, but owing to a wound he gave up the service. He makes pretty good pickings out of these lunatics. You see, being an old servant of the Government, it favours him; but that is *entre nous*, *mon cousin*.’

‘*Qu’est ce que ça veut dire*—the Government favours him? There are no lunatics in the senate are there?’

Franval laughed.

‘*Que tu es un drôle, toi!* Certainly not; but there are certain people in the world on whom nature has bestowed too great an extent of tongue, and the Government would rather pay for their board and lodging in a house like that than allow them to go on using their unruly member to the injury of their country. *Vois-tu?*’

‘Oh, I see,’ answered Jerome. ‘But I thought that was a lunatic asylum—I did not know it was a Government prison.’

‘*Du tout—du tout,*’ said Franval, visibly discomfited. ‘It is a *maison de santé*. It is dangerous to call things by plain names.’

‘Then,’ said Jerome, ‘may I understand that there are no lunatics there?’

‘*Dicu!* you will get us all into terrible hot water if you talk thus. They are all lunatics, only some of them are not mad.’

‘*Bien*, and now perhaps you will tell me whether this same Docteur Dupuis is a large, burly man, with only one arm?’

‘*C’est lui*; but he does more with the one arm which remains to him than most men who have all their limbs.’

‘So the Docteur Dupuis is established there, is he? Well, some people have luck, to be sure!’

‘You know him! *Ma foi, Jerome, il me semble* that you know everybody.’

‘I have not traversed Europe for nothing, *mon bon* Franval. After I have taken some breakfast with your good wife and pretty daughter, I will go and renew my acquaintance with the Docteur Dupuis.’

During the entire time of the repast, Jerome’s queer old face twinkled and beamed with delight—affairs were progress-

ing to his entire satisfaction. Far be it from anyone to think he had come to P—— to rejoice himself with a sight of the relations from whom he had been so long separated!—family ties, as far as Jerome was concerned, were no ties at all. No, the quiet-looking *maison de santé* at the bottom of the street was the object of interest which had attracted him to the spot. Ever since he had left Mathilde he had been lingering about Lyons, getting what information he could about her husband and her future prospects. After a good deal of difficulty, he had traced M. d'Aubigné to a *maison de santé* in P——, and he was determined if possible to see him for himself, and ascertain on what plea he was incarcerated there. Jerome's suspicious mind always dwelt on foul play, and he had a notion that it was to prevent M. d'Aubigné from making his wife an allowance that his friends, armed with the necessary certificates from two French doctors, had quietly locked him up out of harm's way.

So Jerome trotted gaily down the street, and rang the bell which hung over the massive gateway. It was quickly answered by a sharp, active-looking man in a blue blouse.

'Monsieur le Docteur Dupuis—can I see him?'

Jerome was at once allowed to pass through the ominous-looking gateway, and was ushered into a small parlour, conventional in its rigid simplicity. The wooden chairs, table, floor, were all polished till they had become like glass—in fact, the whole place was clean to a fault. After waiting a few minutes, the Directeur of this cheerless abode entered the room. He was a large, strongly-built man, rather inclined to *embon point*, with a certain amount of benignity in his countenance; but a disagreeable twitch about his somewhat thin lips led you to suspect he was not altogether the good-natured, easy going man he would have had you believe. He bowed courteously to his visitor, and requested to be told in what way he could serve him.

Jerome stood and laughed till his funny old face was crimson with the exertion. The grand portly Directeur looked on in stately astonishment. In all his experience no lunatic had ever presented *himself* for admission, but he had every reason to believe that one stood before him now.

'Have you forgotten Jerome Domet, *vieux camarade*?' said the old soldier, at last, slapping the doctor on the back.

'*Toi!* I thought you were dead,' and all the colour forsook the great man's face.

'You hoped I was, you mean. *Tiens*, my receptions at P—— are not flattering. Maître Franval, the landlord of the "*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*," who is *un cousin à moi*, did not recognise me, and you think I am dead!'

'Maître Franval your cousin?'

'*Si*. We claim P—— as our birthplace, *nous autres*. Not exactly the place where you would have taken up your abode, had you known, *hein?*'

'I have been here some years, and have lived respected and at peace.'

'*Vrai*, and you are not particularly anxious that I should come and disturb you now.'

'Let the past be buried in oblivion, my good Jerome; it cannot benefit you to make it known, and it will be my ruin.'

'You must have suffered a good deal. I am not very sensitive, but I cannot say I should like to go about the world with the knowledge that an innocent man was toiling in chains under a hot Southern sun, leading the life of a *forçat* for my crime.'

Le Docteur Dupuis shook all over, as he said in a low voice—

'He is dead.'

'Dead, is he? Well, but the proofs of his innocence and of your guilt are not dead, for they are in my possession.'

'It can do no good to publish them and crush me, now. In my will I have left all the money I have made in this house to his widow and child.'

'*Bon*; you think, like the rest, that money will wipe out the brand of infamy. It would require a good deal of small change to cover up your crime. *Il me semble*, too, that I never received any payment for my silence in this matter.'

'You never asked for any.'

'Not too late now, *mon cher*.'

'Name your price,' said the doctor, eagerly, delighted to find that Jerome would come to terms.

'*Je ne suis pas avare*—you can keep your paltry gold. It is a service I have come to ask of you.'

'Most willingly, my dear Jerome; putting the fear of this threatened exposure on one side, you know how gladly

I would serve you,' and he gave his visitor a chair and drew one up for himself close to him.

'*Hein, hein—ne marchez pas si vite,*' interrupted Jerome, 'you have in your house a certain M. d'Aubigné, I think?'

'*Mais oui,*' and the Directeur fidgeted and looked uncomfortable.

'*Il paie bien ?*

'*Si, si, assez bien.*'

'His disease?'

'Bah ! *il a la cervelle un peu timbrée, mais pour le reste* he is, perhaps, more disagreeable than actually mad.'

'I must see him.'

'Quite impossible, my dear friend. It is forbidden by his friends that he should be made an object of public exhibition.'

'You owe me a service, I think,' said Jerome with a smile.

'This one is too difficult.'

'Bah, it is for you to make it easy, or the *habitués* of the "*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*" shall have such a bowl of gossip with their evening pipe as P——has not produced this many a day.'

Le Docteur Dupuis did not answer, but sat meditating in silence.

'You are a slow thinker,' suggested Jerome at last. 'Is it quicker work to forge another man's name than to open the door of one of the dens of your establishment and let me look on the face of this maniac?'

'Have you ever seen him?' asked the doctor, looking up.

'Every day of my life during years. So the wind sits in that quarter, does it? No, you will not succeed in passing off any one else for him, *mon ami*. *Tiens*, is this all your gratitude for my long silence? Make haste and let me look at him without any further talk.'

'You will never see him again in this world.'

'*Et pourquoi, M. le Docteur ?*'

'Because he is dead—has been dead for some months.'

'*Tiens, tiens, tiens !*' said Jerome, taking a long breath, then drawing quite close up to his old comrade—'perhaps you will have the goodness to explain the meaning of this. Did you put him out of the way, by chance?'

'No, no, he died in a fit of epilepsy.'

‘Then why all this mystery?’

‘His relations promised to pay me two hundred francs a month as long as I kept his death a secret.’

‘Two hundred francs a month, then, is the price of my silence. *Allons, nous sommes quittes.* Do you know why they have done this?’

‘It was not my business to inquire.’

‘Perhaps not, but I will tell you. To keep his widow, the daughter of the late General la Fitte, from her dower. *Mon Dieu!* what will not hatred and malice make people do? But I have beaten them—I have beaten them, *tiens!*’ and he began to caper about the room in his delight.

‘What is one man’s poison is another man’s bread,’ said the doctor, looking very grave and glum.

‘Jerome shook him by both hands. ‘You will sleep better to-night, *mon ami, et pour le reste*, Madame Mathilde is not ungenerous. Now for the certificate of the good man’s death. Where was he buried?’

‘*Au Cimetière Montmartre—very quietly.*’

‘That will do—now, *au revoir, ami Dupuis.* When I have finished this business, I will come and look you up again, perhaps, and there shall be no reference to the past, *mon cher.*’


With a downcast, troubled countenance Docteur Dupuis himself let his visitor out of his prison like abode, and Jerome speedily bade his relations at the ‘*Petit Bon-homme Rouge*’ farewell, overjoyed at having so successfully and rapidly accomplished his mission.





CHAPTER XXIII.

WOMAN-OF-THE-PERIODISM.

‘PON my word, Georgie, you have dressed yourself up, and no mistake about it ! That is a regular girl-of-the-period costume. Where the devil are you going to ?’

‘Well, yes—I think it is rather a neat thing in clothes ; but then I always had good taste in dress, my dear Oswald.’

‘Had you ? Well, you have not given us a specimen of it to-day. I don’t think I ever saw anyone look much more slang than you do. Good gracious ? what objects some women do make of themselves, to ‘be sure !’ and Clive laughed as he put down the newspaper he was reading, and surveyed his wife.

‘How rude you are, Oswald ; after I have paid, or rather owe, such a lot of money for this dress, too,’ answered Georgie, half crying.

‘There, there, that will do, no whimpering, for mercy’s sake ; wear what you like ; slang is bad enough, but snivelling is worse.’

‘If you hate slang, it was strange you married me,’ said Georgie, getting angry ; ‘for I am sure it is my natural element.’

‘Then, like most young women, I suppose you lived in an unnatural element while you wanted to catch me ? And you have allowed your bad habits to develop themselves extensively since your marriage. Pray, may I ask where you are going this afternoon ?’

‘Where I shall be more appreciated than I seem likely to be at home.’

‘Suppose I forbid you to go out without me ?’

‘Do. Be as brutal and hateful as you like, and then I shall get a divorce without any difficulty.’

‘Georgie, Georgie, are you tired of me already?’

‘She was on her knees beside him in a moment.

‘No, Oswald; dear Oswald, forgive me! Blame that unruly tongue of mine. My heart is all yours. But you are so cross and irritable you make me quite angry with you. I wish we had never married, and then we should not have quarrelled. I wonder if all married people quarrel, Oswald? Don’t glare so, as though you would annihilate me with a look; but kiss me, and tell me I may go out and amuse myself.’

‘Oh! of course—let you have your own way; that seems to have been all you were made for. Who is the favoured admirer who is expected to bestow his approbation on that most ridiculous new garment of yours? Hardly Willbraham, I should think. It is scarcely sober enough to suit his taste.’

‘You dear, old, jealous ape,’ said Georgie, laughing, ‘that is why you are so crusty, is it? Now, you surely don’t expect me to stop at home, do you? No other women do, and why should I?’

Dogs and men are made to roam,
Cats and women stay at home,

was a very applicable doggerel a hundred years ago, but both cats and women have given up the chimney-corner long since.’

‘Oh! go, by all means. It seems to me that in this establishment the usual order of things is entirely changed. You go out larking about from morning till morning comes again, and I have to sit at home and keep the house warm; but, by Jove! there shall be an alteration of some kind, and soon, too, or I will know the reason why.’ And he kicked a footstool to the other end of the room in his wrath.

Georgie looked rather frightened at this sudden outburst, and sat meekly down in the corner of the sofa without speaking.

There was a silence for some minutes. Oswald was the first to break it.

‘Pray do not let me keep you in, Mrs. Clive. I do not object to your going out, but I do object to staying here myself.’

‘Then why don’t you come with me, dear Oswald?’

‘To be made an ass of by a parcel of women in a drawing-room—thank you, no, that is not exactly in my line.’

‘Then what do you want to do?’

‘Never mind. Now, go and amuse yourself, and leave me to settle my own affairs. I am quite capable at present, thank you.’

And Georgie, nothing loth to get away, and grumbling to herself about Oswald’s irritable, unbearable temper, went quickly off, and got into Lady Ida’s brougham, which was waiting for her at the door. Alas! what a change the last few weeks have effected in pretty Georgie! When they are together, she and Oswald are continually snarling and quarrelling; then making it up, simply to begin quarrelling and snarling again. Thus they neither of them derive much comfort or happiness from wedded life; added to which, Georgie has adopted, as a fixed idea, that, to keep up the rights and privileges of a married woman, she must be thoroughly independent in her habits, fast in her dress, and very flippant and unguarded in her speech. On the whole, she has considerably degenerated. As for ‘settling down,’ which is the phrase respectable old matrons usually connect with matrimony, that is about the last thing she thinks of—on the contrary, she has become ten times more restless and fond of excitement than ever. And as Mr. Clive distinctly declines to accompany her into society, she is left pretty much to follow the unchecked suggestions of her own foolish little brain.

On the present occasion she took herself and her new costume, which had not undeservedly called forth her husband’s animadversions, to a *matinée musicale* at the house of a Mrs. Foublanque—another young married lady of the woman-of-the-period stamp, who was always ready to hold out a hand to help Georgie in her recklessness and folly.

‘My dear Mrs. Clive, what a love of a dress!—but how late you are!’ was the greeting from her friend, when they met at the top of the now crowded stair-case.

‘Oswald kept me; he is in such a brutal humour. But I will tell you another time,’ whispered Georgie, as she passed on into the room. There, she was soon surrounded by a troop of admirers; for Georgie, with her saucy, reckless talk, and dashing, off-hand ways, was a general favourite.

‘Where is Clive?’ asked Sir Henry Wilbraham, as he pushed through the crowd to shake hands with Georgie.

‘You did not expect him to come out with me, here, did you?’ she asked, looking up surprised.

‘Why not?—are you quite alone?’

‘Good gracious! Sir Henry, when you have a wife do you intend to trot her about yourself to every party she goes to during a London season? What a bore she will think you!’ said a young lady who was standing by.

‘I am sure I wish Mr. Clive would go with me—at all events sometimes,’ said Georgie, with a sort of wistful expression on her face; ‘but I suppose men will do as they like. Sir Henry, get me some tea, please—this room is too crowded to be pleasant.’

He gave her his arm, and they made their way down the stairs together.

‘You never come to see me now,’ remarked Georgie, as soon as she was seated in a comfortable corner, sipping her cup of tea.

‘I have been a good deal engaged lately,’ was the short answer.

‘Too much engaged to come and see me! Oh! Sir Henry, I did not think you would ever tell *me* that.’

‘Well, perhaps it is not exactly the real reason,’—and he coloured and looked slightly confused—‘I don’t think Clive much likes me to come.’

‘Never mind Clive: if one is to attend to all his vagaries, one may as well give up living at once. I am sure he does not make himself so pleasant and delightful a companion that one need never wish for a visitor.’

‘Georgie, Georgie, he is your husband.’

‘So much the worse! Well, I don’t exactly mean that; but he is so insufferably disagreeable sometimes, that if I did not go out and amuse myself, I should die of the horrors; but I suppose all husbands are alike. Marriage is only another name for squabbling.’

‘I hope not,’ said Sir Henry, fervently. ‘Misery in this world is, more or less, the lot of man; but, to my mind, instead of increasing our discomfort, matrimony ought to lessen it.’

‘“Doubling our pleasures and our toils dividing,” as the poet hath it. Oh, your theories are all very fine to talk over, but they are like mamma’s grand schemes for educating and improving the moral condition of the lower orders—they all

end in moonshine, and 'the lower orders will remain ignorant, debased, and immoral till the end of time.'

'Then you think people should sit still and do nothing towards the improvement of their fellows?'

'I should be sorry to stop anyone from having a little harmless amusement; but they would not get much hope of success from me; as well start a missionary society to settle matrimonial disputes and tune husbands and wives to the same key.'

'If faith and love cannot do that,' said Sir Henry, 'the interference of no third person ever will.'

'Fiddlestick with your faith and love! I love Oswald after my own fashion, or I should not have run away with him. And I suppose he loves me; but we fight like gamecocks.'

Sir Henry looked very grave, and Georgie burst out laughing.

'Oh! of course you are shocked, you sanctimonious old dear; but if you had to endure Oswald's ill-temper, you would quarrel with him too, and you know I am no saint.'

'I have no right to speak,' said Sir Henry, in a low voice; 'but do you think you are quite doing your duty by your husband? You will excuse me for suggesting this, but I am your friend, you know.'

'What on earth do you mean? You are always using that nasty little hard word. Now, define my duty to Oswald—not to flirt with you, I suppose, stands paramount?'

'Oh! Mrs. Clive, if you are going to talk in this strain, let us change the conversation.'

'No, no, I will be serious. You know I want to do what is right, only some evil spirit within always holds me back. Tell me now, what it is that is wrong.'

'Well, since your marriage, it seems to me that Clive has been very quiet, and his old bad habits have been, in a great measure, given up. Do you not think he would be more likely to be reclaimed altogether if you remained at home as his companion, and sought to make his life a pleasant and a cheery one?'

'Humph!' said Georgie, 'that is my duty, is it? Well, it is a very disagreeable one, for Oswald is by no means pleased with the quiet life he is leading, let me tell you; besides, I like to go out and air myself in the world,' and she

shook herself pettishly. 'How nasty of you to rub one's conscience the wrong way, by suggesting this sort of thing !

'Then you will acknowledge that I am right ?'

'No, I won't ; I will only acknowledge that you are very provoking.'

'Well, never mind about that. You will act on my suggestion, will you not ? You will give up going about the world in the independent, flaunting fashion in which you now do, gaining for yourself the appellation of "the fast Mrs. Clive," and you will stay at home more, and strive to make your own fireside cheerful and attractive ? Georgie, you scarcely realised the grave responsibility you took on yourself when you married this man. You knew what he was, what he had been, and it became your duty, by your feminine graces and your woman's love, to try and wean him from evil ; instead of which, it seems to me that you are driving him away from you by your own thoughtlessness. Forgive me for speaking thus plainly, but recollect you sent for me, and asked me to act as your friend in the first instance. I have done what I can to help your husband back to the place his birth entitles him to hold in society ; but you, too, my dear child, must make an effort to keep him there. And I cannot look on the present state of things without the very gravest feelings of apprehension for the future.'

'Oh ! Sir Henry, you have quite frightened me ! If Oswald would only help me, it would be so easy to be good ; but I cannot stand alone. I wish I had married you—you would have told me what to do.'

'Hush ! my dear Mrs. Clive ; it is too late to talk of this now. Recollect, too, that, whatever your lot in life, it is equally fraught with difficulties and temptations ; it is for you to strive to overcome them. You say you love your husband, and I believe you do ; let your love, then, actuate you now, as it did on that morning in Paris when you forsook all and went with him. It was for life, remember, you made a sacrifice then, and you must go on making it to the end.'

'Am I to shut myself up within four walls with Oswald and never go out ? Oh ! I cannot do that ! Of course I love him, or, as you say, I should not have married him ; but he has become so cross, and I cannot bear to be scolded.'

'Have you ever asked yourself how much your conduct contributes to his ill-temper ? Oh ! Georgie, you little know

how deeply I have been grieved at remarks I have heard made on the reckless, careless sort of life you are passing ! What, then, must your husband feel ?’

‘We had a row just before I came out, because he said my dress was “girl-of-the-periodish.” Perhaps you agree with him ; if you do I will send it back to the dress-maker to-morrow, and tell her to wear it herself.’

‘It is not for me to interfere in matters of dress ; I may already have said too much, but I trust you will take my words in a friendly spirit, as they are meant, and say, dear Mrs. Clive, that you will not neglect the warning.’

‘No, Mentor mine, I will think about it. But I will promise nothing. If Oswald gets unbearable, you may be sure I will go out. And now let us go upstairs, for it seems to me we are affording food for talk.’

About a quarter of an hour later, Georgie went away. She was more subdued than was her wont. Sir Henry’s words had had their weight, and she could not help recognising their truth. It was no very frequent occurrence for Georgie to pass her own conduct in review, but during the ten minutes’ drive home she did inflict a little self-examination on herself. The picture was scarcely a pleasing one, and she entered her home resolved, if possible, to follow Sir Henry’s suggestions. After a hasty toilette, for it wanted but a few minutes to the dinner hour, she joined her mother and her husband, who were already in the drawing-room.

‘Well, Georgie dear, I hope you have enjoyed yourself,’ said the fond mother, smiling on her pretty daughter.

‘Oh ! yes, but it was very hot and crowded. I am tired of parties. I don’t think I shall go to any more.’

‘Indeed !’ exclaimed Oswald, ‘I suppose that loud costume of yours did not have so much effect on society as you expected.’

‘It was not faster than many others there, but your remarks made me hate it, and I felt uncomfortable in it all the time. I have already sent it back to the dressmaker.’

‘What the devil did you go out in it for ?’

‘Because I was angry with you ; but I have repented since, so please don’t say any more about it. Will you take me to the theatre to-night, Oswald, I should so like it ?’

‘I thought you were going to Lady Something-or-another’s ball.’

She shook her head.

'Not without you. I am beginning to think that going about so much alone is not respectable.'

'Why, you veer about like a weathercock, Georgie ! A few hours ago you told me the only object in being married was, that you might go about everywhere without a chaperon.'

'Well, I have changed my mind, that is all.'

'Has anyone insulted you—said anything they ought not to say ?' and he looked fierce.

'How absurd you are ! Of course not,' and she laughed.

'He does care, then, about what happens to me. Poor old Oswald !' she thought to herself, 'I daresay half his crossness is my fault, as Sir Henry says.'

'Then what has made you come so suddenly to this determination ?'

'I missed you, dear, so I came to the conclusion that, if you will not go out with me, I had better stop at home with you.'

'They say women are "kittle cattle," and I think that they are right. I wonder how long this new fit will last ?'

'As long as you are a good boy.'

'Oh ! well, I suppose I must take you to the play to-night.'

'There is a dear, good Oswald ! Come along, let us be very quick with dinner.'

So they hurried over their evening repast, and got to the 'Gaiety' before the curtain had gone down on the first act of the Drama ; and Georgie sat very comfortably and happily in her stall. She was pleased and satisfied at having Oswald by her side, and felt on very good terms with herself for the share she considered she had had in inducing him to come out, and in making him amiable. The play, too, amused her, and she was altogether in one of her most fascinating and charming of humours.

Towards the end of the performance, when Georgie had nearly exhausted herself, laughing over a burlesque which, to quote the newspapers, was nightly filling the house to overflowing, she suddenly gave up all interest in the stage and directed her undivided attention to one of the private boxes. After watching it attentively for some time she clutched her husband's arm, with a sort of convulsive grasp.

'That woman—she is there ! I hoped she was dead !'

'What woman ?—what is the matter, Georgie ? Has the

play turned your brain? Pray compose yourself; your behaviour will call forth remarks.'

'Look, look!—don't you see her?' was her only answer.

Clive looked up, and, half concealed by the curtain of the box, he saw Madame d'Aubigné.

'Is that the only reason of all this emotion? What a foolish little thing you are!'

'Oh! I do so hate that woman, Oswald! What made me look up there, I wonder? It must have been some mysterious power which she possesses—I firmly believe she has the Evil Eye!'

Clive looked uncomfortable and annoyed.

'Georgie, this is too silly—you must learn to control your emotions. Madame d'Aubigné is an old friend of mine; I had hoped you would have liked her.'

'I should like to poison her!' was Georgie's answer.

'Come along, let us go home,' he said, rising; a public theatre is not the place for these heroics.'

'Anywhere, away from that woman's eyes!'

They speedily made their way out into the corridor, where, to Oswald's no small discomfiture, they met Mathilde, who, accompanied by some friends, must have risen when they did, purposely to effect this rencontre.

'How do you do, Mrs. Clive?' she said, putting on her sweetest smile.

Georgie bowed her head, but did not answer.

'I regret not having seen you before this, to congratulate you on your marriage.'

Still, Georgie did not speak.

'I hope to take an early opportunity of calling on you,' continued Mathilde; 'pray offer my best compliments to Lady Ida.'

'I would rather you did not come. I shall not see you if you do,' said Georgie, in a sharp, shrill voice, keeping a nervously tight hold of Clive's arm the while.

Mathilde laughed, as she said—

'I am sorry I have displeased your wife, Mr. Clive. I fear, however, she took a dislike to me when we first met.'

'She is a spoiled child—you must forgive her,' he muttered, as he hurried Georgie into the brougham.

Tears now flowed unrestrainedly. Clive did not speak as long as they lasted. He was very angry, and perhaps thought

it wiser not to trust himself, lest he should say something he might regret. This time his displeasure was vented against Mathilde. She knew that Georgie hated the very sight of her, and why she wished to raise this storm he could not conceive. True, it was very provoking that Georgie had taken this violent dislike to Mathilde; but then, manlike, he was a little flattered by it. If she did not love him very dearly, she would not trouble herself to be jealous; so he threw his arm round her and caressed her while he thought, 'Mathilde shall suffer for this. I will be a whole week, at least, before I look her up, or take any notice of her.'

And the pretty eyes were dried, and Georgie was all smiles again long before they reached home. A few kind, loving words from Oswald always brought her sunshine back. And he had promised that, on the following day, he would take her to the sea for a week or two. Thus he wished to put it beyond his power to call on Mathilde for the present.





CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WIDOW'S CAP.



GEORGIE and Clive spent a fortnight making a tour of the different watering-places on the south coast. They did not stop sufficiently long at any one of them to become bored ; and altogether they were happier than they had been since their marriage. The honeymoon had been a signal failure, for want of cash ; but on the present occasion, Lady Ida had supplied them with a sum of money, which they both knew very well how to spend ; and Georgie was beginning to think that after all it was not so difficult to be happy with Oswald, and that Sir Henry's suggestion that she should stay more at home with her husband was answering to perfection ; and she fully determined to devote herself to her domestic duties, and redeem, if possible, all the little mistakes and misunderstandings her former fastness had brought about. Poor Georgie, however, was destined to receive a check from an unexpected quarter. Oswald had not been many hours in town, before he wended his way to the lodgings where he believed Mathilde to be staying. To his discomfiture, the maid who opened the door informed him that Madame d'Aubigné had been gone for a week or more. He was just turning away with slow steps, cursing his luck the while, when the mistress of the house came forward.

‘ If a dark, good-looking gentleman called, Madame bade me give him this,’ she said. ‘ I make no doubt, sir, but you are the gentleman.’ And she smirked pleasingly ; while Clive could not help laughing at the implied compliment.

It was simply a piece of paper, on which was written an address in Mayfair, not two streets from Lady Ida's house.

‘ What is up now ? ’ thought Clive to himself. ‘ Mathilde

must have had a stroke of luck lately, or she could not have afforded a house in that locality. She has a way of never getting into money difficulties. I wish to goodness I had !'

He arrived at last at the address given. The door was opened by old Jerome. His comical face beamed all over with fun and merriment when he saw Oswald Clive.

'Madame will be charmed to see you, monsieur,' he said, as he showed him upstairs to the drawing-room.

Mathilde was seated in a large arm-chair by the fire ; all the bits of *bric-à-brac* which had once adorned the Twickenham villa had been unpacked, and were tastefully arranged about the pretty room. She had the knack of uniting English comfort with the French love of the ornate, which was probably the result of her mixed descent. And the tiny house in Mayfair, in which Madame d'Aubigné had taken up her abode, was a perfect little gem. 'Too small to live in, and too big to hang at your watch-chain,' as Lord Hervey said of the Duke of Devonshire's retreat at Chiswick.

She did not rise to receive her visitor, but merely dropping the French novel she was reading, into her lap, lay gracefully back in her chair till Oswald had come up close to her.

'Confound it, Mathilde, what new mummery is this?' he asked, as he stood before her, and looked at the widow's cap, and the other trappings of woe with which she had adorned her person. You will get into some precious mess before you have done, with all this masquerading.'

'Mummery !—masquerading !—really, Mr. Clive, do you thing it is befitting to come into the house of mourning, and talk in this strain ?'

'Pooh ! cease this nonsense, and tell me what all this means ? I do not believe there is any one in the world you would mourn over, unless it were myself ; and I am very thriving just at present, thank goodness !'

'*Mon Dieu ! voilà une petite tête bien vaine.* But a truce to *niaiseries*. M. d'Aubigné is dead.'

'Really and truly, or is it only the last new dodge ?'

'Positively ; and what is much more to the purpose, by his death I become the possessor of a very neat little independence.'

'Which is the reason, I suppose, that you have donned the sables ?'

'*Il faut respecter les convenances, mon cher Oswald.* I have come to the conclusion that English people are not so entirely averse to sundry little naughty habits and mal-practices as they would have you believe; only the peccadilloes must be covered over with just the thinnest piece of tissue paper, to keep them from shocking too much the dear English sensibilities. But where have you been during this long time?'

'Down to the sea with Georgie. I should like to know what you meant by coming to speak to her in that off-hand fashion at the theatre, when you know that she hates you? You only got snubbed for your pains. She is as wilful as Old Nick. I was compelled to take her for a trip to smoothe matters over.'

'This fanciful little wife of yours must be brought to her senses, Oswald. It is necessary that I should visit at Lady Ida's.'

'Quite impossible!—Georgie will never stand it. She is much too jealous.'

'You must get it arranged in some way, *mon ami*, or I shall give up this pretty new home of mine and go and live in Paris. I do not think that is exactly what you wish. As the widow of M. d'Aubigné, I shall have a certain position there, and I do not intend to hide my light under a bushel, and pine for want of society here. Do you understand? The last few years when I had to make the best of life, must be blotted out. Henceforth I am Madame la Comtesse d'Aubigné, and as such I intend to receive and be received; and if you would keep me in England, you must help me.'

'I will see what can be done, with all my heart; but Georgie is such a spoiled child, she will have her own way. Perhaps, though, I might be able to manage it through Lady Ida.'

'Poor Oswald!—has he so little influence over his wife that he has to get his mother-in-law to use hers? However, it is nothing to me, as long as you succeed in obtaining what you want. And now, do you think your nerves have recovered from their shock at seeing me in weeds? By-the-way, you have not told me how well I look in them. If they have recovered their equilibrium, I have a little more galvanism ready to try them.'

'It is nothing disagreeable, I hope?' he said, eagerly.

Mathilde rang the bell.

‘Is he asleep, Jerome?’ she asked, when the old servant appeared.

Having received an answer in the affirmative, she rose and begged Clive to follow her.

‘What folly is it?’ he asked, as he observed a smile on Mathilde’s face—‘a new puppy, I suppose, or some other absurd novelty.’

‘It is a good old dog, and a toothless one, so you have nothing to fear,’ she answered, laughing, as she opened the door of a back room.

Clive looked in cautiously, but when he saw old Sternheim sleeping placidly on a sofa by the fire, he recoiled as though a viper had stung him.

‘Mathilde, why have you done this?’ he asked—‘what new devilry has possessed you?’

‘You do not seem to think I can be actuated purely by Christian charity. I am rich; he is poor. If I wish my newly-acquired riches to bring me prosperity, I must begin by being generous.’

‘How can you stand quietly there and talk such nonsense to me? You may humbug other people with your Christian charity, but I know you better.’

She laughed, then she laid her hand on his shoulder, and drew him close to her.

‘Do you know where Ralph Baird is now?’ she asked, in a sort of earnest whisper.

‘Ralph Baird be d——d! I am sick to death of the inquiries about him.’

‘So am I, and therefore is *he* here,’ she said, pointing through the aperture of the half-closed door at old Sternheim.

‘What!—do you think if he were put out of the way, there would be no more talk? You are precious mistaken if you do. I expect that old American father will put in an appearance before long!’

‘I never thought anything half so common-place. Poisoning that poor old man would be of no earthly use—he is perfectly harmless; it would only add another sin to an already rather heavy list. No, my dear Oswald, my maxim is, “Never transgress uselessly;” like other extravagant propensities, it frequently brings you to ruin.’

‘Then what does all this mean?’

‘Why, that, if I mistake not, the presence of this old man in my house will contribute in many ways to change the aspect of affairs, and assist both you and me to live down the recollection of those days at Spa, when we certainly rather made fools of ourselves.’

‘Ah ! I wonder, Mathilde, what became of Jules Berthel’s soul, after he blew his brains out that night, and what will become of the souls of those who urged him on to play till he risked the last stiver he had in the world at those cursed tables ?’

‘Hush, Oswald ! If we are to make ourselves responsible for the evil deeds of other people, we shall not bear to think, and life will become a burden and a misery.’

‘My life has become so, long since,’ answered Clive, ‘or I should not, on more than one occasion, have had serious thoughts of ending it. Poor little Georgie ! she saved me once, when I was on the very brink of self-destruction.’

Mathilde’s large eyes gleamed.

‘Georgie, Georgie, always Georgie !’ she said. ‘I wonder you come here at all. Do you mean to say you are really happy with that petted doll ?’

‘Happy I can never be again. I do not easily forget, my dear Mathilde, and the past is ever rising up before me, and tormenting me with its recollections. Often, when Georgie upbraids me for being irritable and cross, she would, perhaps, pity me, did she know how conscience is at work, and gives my mind no peace by night or by day.’

Madame d’Aubigné laughed.

‘You must be amused, *mon cher*—you have got into low spirits, that is all. Let me be your physician. It will not be the first time—eh *mon* Oswald ? I will soon divert your mind away from all this mawkish retrospection. Come and dine and spend the evening here next Tuesday ; you will find one or two kindred spirits. In the meantime, ask Lady Ida to call on me. If Georgie be obstinate about it—well, I suppose she must be forgiven ; after all, it is rather a compliment to feel that she is jealous.’

‘But Sternheim ? Oh ! Mathilde, assure me once more that you will not let him come to any harm. Poor old fellow ! We were “pals” in the old days, in the States ; and I have injured him quite enough by betraying the confidence he reposed in me.’

‘He is perfectly safe here, you foolish disbeliever. Mr. Dillon comes to see him every day, and is quite satisfied that he could not be in better quarters.’

So Clive and Mathilde returned to the pretty drawing-room, and the widow’s cap, which had only been put on for his especial benefit, was cast on one side. It was a badge of mourning Mathilde had not the smallest intention of imposing on herself. And they sat together for a long time by the cheerful fire, and talked more confidentially and amicably than they had done since they got themselves into those troubles from the remembrance of which Clive could not disembarass himself. They had both gone several steps up the social ladder of late—Clive had gained considerably by his marriage, and Madame d’Aubigné, as a rich widow, was a very different person from the poor, separated wife, who had but her wits for a livelihood.

At last Clive departed, promising to return soon and assist at a little dinner, which Mathilde hoped would only be the first of a series.

A little dinner! What an amount of study is necessary before you can become an adept at giving a little dinner! A perfect *cuisine*, an amount of artistic elegance which shall be almost unrivalled, added to conversational powers of no mean order, are positively necessary before any small entertainment shall be worthy of this suggestive appellation. The success, too, of the whole affair singularly depends on the sympathy which exists between its members. One chord struck out of tune will be felt by the whole party, and will probably not cease to jar inharmoniously during the entire evening.

According to Madame Campan, the following system may be adopted as regards dinners: ‘If there be ten people at dinner, the conversation will turn on travels and literature; if there be eight, art, sciences, inventions, and news will probably form the topics of conversation; if there be six assembled at the social board, politics and philosophy may be touched on; four people will naturally revert to romantic adventures in which they have individually taken part; and two people dining together will of course converse solely of themselves.’

Mathilde’s dinners, while they were perfectly well ap-

pointed and artistic, would be based on a different model ; still there is little doubt that they would be made thoroughly attractive. Mathilde's active mind had arranged a plan of action, and at these little dinners, which she intended should be the most charming of their kind, her forces were to assemble. 'There is nothing like the pleasures of the table to make people on good terms with themselves and with each other,' was Mathilde's argument ; and it had its truth.

As soon as Clive had gone, Mathilde went into the back-room which had been appropriated to Mr. Sternheim's use. The old man was awake now, and was warming himself in front of the fire.

'Good morning, dear Mr. Sternheim ; you have had a long sleep,' said Mathilde, as she knelt down beside his chair in her tender, caressing way.

He looked at her vaguely.

'Where am I?' he asked. 'This is all new and strange. And Franz—I want Franz.'

'He will be here by-and-bye,' she said, soothingly. 'In the meantime, will you not try to make yourself happy with me?'

'Who are you, lady?—*ja, ja*—that face—I see it in my dreams!' And he laid his hand on her head.

'Of course—you have seen it often ; and we are going to be very good friends for the future, are we not, dear old man?'

'If you will—yes. You are tender, soft, but will you be true? Not leave me again for a rich portion! Ah! it was cruel to forsake me! But the lieber Gott made her weak!—poor dear, I will forgive——'

His thoughts were evidently wandering far back to the bygone days when Marie left him for a richer mate.

Mathilde stood and looked at him.

'Stupid old imbecile!' she muttered. And then, she smiled as she almost wondered why she had taken upon herself the charge of this man. Psychological study was scarcely Mathilde's forte, and yet she interested herself about the causes which had affected Mr. Sternheim's brain. She had every reason to believe in the utter selfishness and depravity of human nature ; and even if she had seen life on its best side, her own shrewdness and want of romance would have prevented

her from giving any credit to the fact that it was possible for heart to gain so complete a victory over head, as this instance seemed on its surface to afford. Could Mathilde have looked into the old man's past, she would have discovered that to a certain extent her theory was correct, and that long years of work and privation had sown the seeds of the malady, which annoyance and self-recrimination did but ripen.





CHAPTER XXV.

CECIL TRELAWNY.



FEW days later, while Madame d'Aubigné was sitting writing in her pretty drawing-room, to her no small astonishment the door opened, and Jerome ushered in the Yankee widow.

'Oh, Mrs. Baird, I am so delighted to see you !' she exclaimed, as she rushed forward in her gushing way to give her visitor a cordial welcome.

'How do you know what has brought me here?' was the short answer. 'That all is not as it should be, you are fully aware. If you had not a little conscience left, notwithstanding your many vices, you would have been to see me long ere this, I fancy.'

'I heard you were angry and annoyed with me, and I feared to face you,' said Mathilde, looking down.

'Well you might be. So you have taken your quarters up here, have you? What a lot of trumpery you have got in this room, to be sure ! Love of outer display is a bad sign, a very bad sign indeed,' and the good lady sat down and surveyed the apartment carefully, and with every appearance of intense disapprobation.

Mathilde did not speak, but waited—wondering what would come next. What could have induced this old bore to call on her, she was at a loss to conjecture. She had utilised her as far as she saw there was any benefit to be obtained from her, and she had no wish to be troubled with her any farther. True, Mathilde was anxious for female acquaintances, but they must move in a higher sphere than Mrs. Baird was ever likely to attain.

'So you have become rich,' was the next observation.

'This is probably the key to the mystery,' thought Mathilde, as she said quietly, 'My poor husband is dead.'

'Humph! Well, I suppose it is a subject for congratulation, not for condolence; but recollect riches are a snare, and I should think your feet were very likely to carry you straight into a pitfall.'

'If I could manage to hold my own in poverty, surely I ought not to be afraid now,' said Mathilde, laughing.

'But did you hold your own? Do you call deceiving one of your best friends, trampling on the innocent, and misleading the young, holding your own? It may be gain, but it is not morality, Madame d'Aubigné.'

'Mrs. Baird, what does this mean; have you come here to insult me in my own house?'

'You heaped worse insults on me in my house, by practising gross deceit upon me. Do you think I should ever have recommended you as a guardian to the young, if I had even guessed at your gambling propensities?'

'I do not in the least understand you—pray explain yourself, and let your explanation be brief, for I am somewhat pressed for time this morning,' and her large eyes flashed.

Mrs. Baird looked astonished—be it remembered she had never seen Mathilde save in the meekest and mildest of moods.

'My nephew's dark fate has no place in the history of your past life, I presume.'

Madame d'Aubigné laughed.

'This is simply ridiculous,' she said. 'There is no plot for a melodrama as far as I can see, though people seem anxious enough to make one. Because a foolish, good-looking boy, under the influence of youthful romance, chooses to hide himself from his friends for a time, is that any reason why I am to be accused of putting him out of the way?'

Mrs. Baird took a letter from her pocket.

'This missive from my brother-in-law came to hand this morning,' she said. 'He has not been idle in making inquiries about his son, though the illness of his wife has prevented him from leaving the States. He writes here, 'The last time our poor Ralph was seen was in company with the man Clive, and a big-eyed female of his acquaintance, one Madame d'Aubigné.'"

'How dare this low-bred American write of me in such in-

solent terms!’ cried Mathilde, crimsoning with rage. ‘I know nothing of his imbecile offspring.’

‘You should not put yourself in anomalous positions, and then you would not subject yourself to opprobrious epithets; but listen to the rest of the letter, and explain it if you can. I will give it to you in substance, since John Baird’s plain language seems to irritate you. He goes on to say that high words ran between you and Clive, and poor Ralph seemed to be pleading very hard. He was never seen again. That same night a wretched man shot himself in the gaming-room; and, as you and Clive were supposed to have had not a little to do with his fate, you fled from Spa next morning.’

‘There is some truth in your story, Mrs. Baird, as far as the last part of it goes. Poor M. Berthel did blow his brains out at the table, while we were in the room—and it was a fearful sight! Mr. Clive, who was never very strong-minded, was so affected by it, I feared he would have gone mad. I therefore induced him to leave the place; and what could I do but let Jerome accompany him?—he was not fit to be trusted alone. I do not believe he had anything to do with the circumstances. Why, we had only known M. Berthel a few days! Poor young man!—it was very sad. There was a fair English girl, to whom he was engaged to be married. Pretty Flora! I wonder how she got over her lover’s untimely fate?’

‘Very creditable, indeed,’ said Mrs. Baird, ‘for a young, good-looking woman like you to be interfering in these affairs! You would not have taken the trouble if some strong feeling had not actuated you. You, a married woman too!—it is most disgraceful! You know what Lord Bacon says, “Nuptial love maketh mankind, friendly love perfecteth it, but wanton love corrupteth and embaseth it.”’

‘And I presume you wish to rank my *friendship* for Mr. Clive in the latter category?’ said Mathilde, with a sneer. ‘These are rather libellous insinuations, Mrs. Baird.’

‘Well, it is no business of mine what you choose to do, said the old lady; ‘but perhaps you will tell me what became of my nephew when Clive took this rapid flight?’

‘He was gone, and was nowhere to be found. I quite agree with you that it is a most mysterious business. I sent Jerome back a week afterwards to see if he could learn any tidings, but no one had either seen or heard of him. Poor

Mr. Clive ! I assure you he was more depressed and overcome at losing the boy than words can express. But what could we either of us do?—the boy was gone, and had left no trace behind. For my own part, I do not despair ; I think he will ere long reappear. Would it not be as well to advertise for him in some of the public papers ?’

‘Throw good money after bad !—that would not be of much avail,’ said Mrs. Baird ; ‘but you have not explained what you three were arguing about when the boy was last seen in your company.’

‘I do not recollect participating in any very animated conversation, or can I exactly remember when I did last see your poor dear nephew,’ answered Mathilde, assuming a thoughtful look, as though she were striving to recall past events. ‘But, dear Mrs. Baird,’ she continued, ‘you do not nurse any rancorous feeling against me, I hope ? I acknowledge I did not treat you altogether quite fairly, but I am not so bad as I seem, and one must do the best one can in this world.’

“‘He who studieth revenge keepeth his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well,” to quote the great Bacon,’ answered the old lady ; ‘thus I have no intention of making my own mind uncomfortable by fostering any violent feelings against you. Nevertheless, my trust and faith in you are shaken.’

‘I can but hope that circumstances will cause you to alter your opinion.’

‘If Ralph were found, the whole position of things would be changed.’

‘I am as anxious to hear something of him as you can be.’

‘I make no doubt of it. A crooked action always brings its own reward in a discomfited mind.’

Mathilde’s brow lowered, and she was about to retort angrily, but as the old lady, having delivered herself of this little sting, rose to depart, she thought it were probably wisest to let her go in peace.

Jerome showed her out with perfect gravity, but he immediately came in laughing and twinkling to his mistress.

‘*Tiens, comme elle a l’air effarouché, cette femme !* Too much learning has startled away her wits. What does she want here, madame ?’

‘*Elle est paquet à faire mourir*—never let her in again, Jerome. Her importunities drive me mad.’

‘The old story—that *sacré* young boy. *Tiens*, madame, some terrible thing will happen, I feel sure. It was very clever for the time, that little *aventure*, but dangerous, I fear, in its results. I like not these visits of inquiry, they give me horrible visions of a prison.’

‘Bah, don’t you look on the black side of affairs, *mon* Jerome. That is only worthy of Mr. Clive. I suppose you heard nothing of the boy while you were abroad?’

‘*Mais non*, madame, I was too much taken up with the *affaire* d’Aubigné. Ah, it required a courage and an *adresse* to get this money from the hands of the vultures.’

‘I am not upbraiding you, *mon vieux*; you have done what not one man in a thousand would have done. Tell me, how did my good family of adoption look when you presented the certificate of M. d’Aubigné’s death?’

Jerome began to laugh.

‘Ah, it was a *petit coup de théâtre*. A little refreshment that comes to one but few times in a life. Such a consternation, when I made my entrance, followed by M. Bérard, the chief lawyer in Lyons. *La vieille Madame*, she knew me in an instant, and tried to assume an amiable exterior. “Ah, Jerome,” she said, “has anything happened to your mistress, that you are here in France?” I answered quickly that my mistress was well, very well in health, she have no sufferings but those which are the result of poverty and neglect, but that since M. d’Aubigné was dead, circumstances would change. “M. d’Aubigné dead!” she cried out; “oh! my son—my son!” and she acted *toute un petit drame* as though she heard for the first time that *ce cher fils* had passed from the earth. “Strange,” I remarked, “that Monsieur should have been dead many months and Madame receive no news.” She looked at me as though to wither me with her eyes, but I am too dried and seasoned to be very impressionable. Then she stopped her shrieks and her tears, for she saw Jerome had out-witted her wiliness. I resigned the situation to the lawyer. I had made my little *coup*, it was for him to work the rest. But his course was easy; I had knocked the enemy over, he had but to disembarass a fallen foe of an unjustly acquired inheritance—*mais à moi* the parting kick into the *fosse* after the work of spoliation. I

called once more on old Madame before I left Lyons, and gave her such a pretty homily on the Christian graces, that she hung her abashed head, and must have thought that Jerome missed his vocation when he joined the *grande armée*.'

'*Bravo, mon vieux !* what would become of me without you? Now tell me what can I do for you? It shall not be said that Mathilde d'Aubigné is ungenerous to her friends. Will you accept a little independence at my hands?'

'*Non, non, mille fois non !* cried Jerome, with emotion, the tears glistening in his eyes the while ; 'what good would an independence be to me? I will quit you never, Mlle. Mathilde. I am happy to die here, with your smile upon me. Besides, too, for once I have used my cunning in a right cause ; it is not often I have had right on my side—let it be a sunbeam in my old age. I implore you, offer me no pay !'

'You are growing sentimental, *vieux soldat*,' said Mathilde laughing, 'who has bewitched you?'

'Ah, you mock me of my weakness, but, *chère Mam'selle*, it exists but for you ;' and he looked affronted as he moved to the door.

'Nonsense, you old *bête !* I delight in you. Only as a rule I thought you rather deprecated sentiment, and hit pretty hard at those weak men who professed a fondness for the softer sex.'

'*Vrai*, but then I only worship you—all other women are *canaille* before you.'

'Every human heart has its weakness ; yours is not exempt, *mon Jerome*. A man or woman without a *tendresse* of some sort would be a curse to themselves and to everyone they came near ; pray do not court so objectionable a destiny. Hark ! there is the visitor's bell. No more bores to be admitted to-day, I beg of you. But I dare say it is Mr. Dillon.' And Mathilde threw herself back in her arm-chair and yawned. She wanted some one to amuse and rouse her—consequently when, instead of Mr. Dillon of whom she was getting rather tired, Jerome was followed into the room by a very different-looking man, her whole countenance woke up as she recognized her visitor. He was dark and olive-complexioned, with seductive eyes, and a low-toned, pleasing voice—the type of man who has a success with women. The sort of individual a paterfamilias

would mark 'dangerous,' and forbid to come into his house, tame-cat fashion, on familiar terms with his young daughters ; but Mathilde had no such scruples or fears, and she held her hand out to him in all amity, as she said—

'My dear Cis, it is an unexpected pleasure to see you again. I thought you were lost for ever.'

'You cannot blame me for the long blank in our friendship,' he said, seating himself beside her. 'Now own that you behaved very badly in leaving Spa as you did, without one word to any of your friends, especially to me.'

'Necessity has no law, my dear Cis.'

'Your interest in Clive has no limit, you mean,' he answered, gaily. 'Because he got himself into a very foolish and unnecessary amount of trouble, you need not have mixed yourself up with the matter. But there is no accounting for a woman's vagaries !'

Mathilde coloured up. She felt this man knew her weakness, and she was rather ashamed of it. The world would have asked how she could have preferred Oswald Clive, when Cecil Trelawny was standing by, and she felt there would have been reason in the question. But it is truly said who can understand that anomalous thing—a woman's heart? Clive was always in difficulties or troubles of some kind, and woman, in some of her moods, loves rather to cherish, caress, and guide than to be mastered, petted, and made subservient to a stronger and more impassioned nature than her own. No poor heart which was once caught firmly in the toils by Cecil Trelawny but would resign its free will, and throb and pant and yearn under the dictates of his warm volcanic nature. Mathilde had once been very nearly conquered, but Clive's difficulties came before the conquest was fully accomplished, and in saving Clive, as far as Trelawny was concerned, she had saved herself.

'How did you find me out?' she asked, anxious, if possible, to change the current of his thoughts.

'Fox saw you a little while back at the theatre, with a fashionable-looking set of people. If you were in London, I was determined you should be discovered. I scarcely expected to find you surrounded by so much magnificence,' he said, as he looked round the apartment.

'Perhaps you hoped my fortunes were at a low ebb, and thought I should the more readily receive you. I did not know you were so terribly *éprouvé*, my poor Cis.'

He laughed joyously. 'I never was afraid of a lady's weapon—her tongue—or I should have been worsted long ago ; but it is absurd for old friends as we are to waste our time in word-warfare. Tell me all that has happened since we parted. So Clive is married?'

'You are determined to fire off your darts, though you wish to silence my battery,' said Mathilde, with a sneer. 'You were always rather womanish in your attacks, Cis Trelawny.'

'So—I did not mean to pain you. I thought he had simply married money. Had I imagined for a moment that the wife stood between you and him, I would not have mentioned the subject for the world.'

'Have you come here to see me, or solely for the purpose of gaining tidings of Mr. Clive?'

'Don't ask such a question. I only let my tongue wander on in careless talk of him, while I contemplate your magnificent beauty.'

Madame d'Aubigné started to her feet.

'Your last love must have been some *grisette* doll, Mr. Trelawny, or you would not insult me by talking such senseless platitudes.'

He took her hand, and drew her back to her place.

'All this fencing is absurd,' he said, in his rich, low tones 'You know full well how long and how truly I have loved you, and that your foolish interest in Clive has been the only barrier between us——'

'Stop a moment,' said Mathilde, smiling. 'My husband is dead—Clive is married—I escaped from you once—beware lest this time you do not escape me!'

'Our heavy English climate must have affected you, my dear madame, or you surely would be fully aware how gladly I would lay my fortunes at your feet, though, according to the fashion of the day, we should probably be in the Divorce Court in a month.'

'Such are the morals of the age,' laughed Mathilde. 'Pray do not try to insinuate that you English are superior to other nations. I have been living here for some months now, and I do not observe any very great severity in your code of morals.'

'Fie, fie, Madame d'Aubigné ! I should not recommend you to let any of our starchy London matrons hear you utter these sentiments.'

‘Pah ! I have been tolerably roughly treated in your England. The proud women of your land regard me as an adventuress, and fear to soil their immaculate robes by letting them come in contact with me ; but I have peeped into one or two family histories since I have been here, and I do not discover that I am so much worse than they, only I enjoy life in whatever pleasurable phase it presents itself, while they bore themselves half their time by trying to make excuses for the other half.’

‘True, as far as it goes,’ answered Trelawny ; ‘but then I do not think that either you or I have much opportunity of judging of the other side of the picture. A highly moral English matron and her missish daughters would bore us to extinction. One wanders in the gardens where the colour of the flowers is to one’s taste ; therefore am I here. But let us forget for awhile all the bores and fools with which the world is laden ; and let me give myself up to the happiness of being once more with you.’

But Mathilde did not enter into the ecstasy of which it pleased Trelawny to talk this garbled nonsense. She loved the world, its excitement, its blaze, its gew-gaws, its whirl, and was far too Bohemian in her instincts to look forward with any pleasure to a long *tête-à-tête* with this man who had as yet failed to evoke in her heart that wail of love for him which it pleased his vanity to imagine he could raise at his will. Mathilde wanted to be amused, not worshipped, and an evening spent in the haunts of pleasure was far more likely to afford her gratification.

‘You are a wise little woman after all,’ said Trelawny, about an hour later, when they both stepped into Mathilde’s brougham, and went off to dine together at the Pall Mall. ‘You know how to keep your adorers in full worship. You never throw them too many rubies at once, and thus do not allow them to become the victims of *ennui*.’

‘It is because I hate the ailment so much myself,’ she answered. ‘Why, we should have yawned ourselves to death before eleven o’clock, shut up between the four walls of my little house.’

And they selected a table rather away from the others, in the large room at the Pall Mall, and ordered a charming little dinner. Cis Trelawny looked round the luxurious *salle*, and then at the beautiful woman by his side, and ex-

pressed in no very measured terms the satisfaction he felt over the pleasures of the passing hour. 'But,' he continued—'I should not be an Englishman without a but—but it is not Paris. There is a something about our heavy islanders that, however they may try to imitate the sprightliness and freedom of their neighbours across the herring-pond, they always remain dense as their own fogs.'

'I have lived very little in Paris since I was a mere child,' said Mathilde; 'and my residence at Lyons did not impress me very favourably with French life. This place amuses me intensely. I suppose it is my foreign antecedents which make me love to dine *en pleine société*. It seems to assist digestion.'

'And so they prattled on through their repast, and people came and went with various histories and temperaments. Now a good old country squire brings in his wife and young daughters, and fussily orders a substantial English meal. For once he will allow them to have a peep into some of the new ideas we English have acquired. 'In the days of our grandmothers, who ever heard of ladies dining in a public room?' he growled; while his two unsophisticated daughters stared open-mouthed at the novel scene which was presented to them. Every now and then they caught little scraps and bits of the conversation which was going on at the next table between a *blasé*, bewigged, elderly man, and a woman with golden hair, who was looking up at him with languishing eyes from under her pencilled brows; and the few words which, wafted on the odour of ihlang-ihlang, reached the ears of these young girls, opened a new vista of knowledge to their innocent minds, and gave them something to think and dream over when loitering among the perfume of the lime-trees in the long avenue at home.

But their attention is at last attracted to a far more noisy party, who seat themselves at a table opposite. It consists of two women, showily and fashionably dressed—the one a brunette, with ravishing eyes, and a smile Venus herself might have envied; the other a dimpled little darling, all fire and fun. They were accompanied by three or four men, *habitués* of the great pleasure-loving world, with whose faces and figures one is very familiar at Goodwood and the Leger, idly lounging on the shady side of Pall Mall, or displaying their horseflesh in the most crowded part of the Ladies' Mile.

Such are the ins and outs of life—a strange picture to an uninitiated mind, as it is allowed for the first time to behold some of its labyrinthine workings, among the blaze and glitter of a public dining-room? Yet thus is everything changed. A levelling system is rife in the land ; high and low, rich and poor, good and evil, must learn to jostle together in the battle of life. Intelligence is the one great object of which we are all in quest, and many and varied are the scenes through which we must pass to attain it.





CHAPTER XXVI.

HUBBLE, BUBBLE, TOIL, AND TROUBLE.

SIR HENRY WILBRAHAM and Dick Earlsfort are breakfasting together in the former's comfortable London quarters. Captain Earlsfort has given up the idea of returning to Paris for the present. He had not much faith in Sir Henry's worldly wisdom, so he came to the determination to put up with the fogs for awhile, in order that he might, if possible, see his friend out of the labyrinth in which he had lately entangled himself. Besides, too, be it remembered, a sort of lingering incipient *penchant* for Glory has been awakened in Dick Earlsfort's breast, and he had, on more than one occasion lately, accompanied Sir Henry on a two or three days' visit to Brinck Hall.

The inmates of that quiet old house had, since the departure of the French companion, returned to their monotonous, steady mode of life ; though Glory still misses, to a certain extent, the bright, fascinating woman who, like a comet, had suddenly appeared in her firmament, but to withdraw herself again equally unexpectedly, leaving no trace behind.

Well, the two men chatted on together as they enjoyed their matutinal repast, till the flow of their talk was interrupted by the entrance of Sir Henry's servant with a letter.

'From Madame d'Aubigné,' says Sir Henry, as he breaks the seal ; and his brow grows somewhat ruffled. 'I wonder what the deuce she wants?'

'More nuts to crack. Fire away, Hal—let us have the kernel !'

Sir Henry opened the letter. A cheque for £50 fell out of the envelope, accompanied by a note telling him of Mathilde's changed position, and upbraiding him for his

suspicious treatment of a lady who, to save her husband's name from degradation, had but preferred to gain her livelihood by returning to her father's. She requested him to take back the gold which he had offered her, assuring him that, now she was rich, it was an utter impossibility for her to accept it.

'Dick, my boy, we have made a grievous mistake,' said Sir Henry, as he put Mathilde's letter in his pocket.

'In what way? What does she say?'

Sir Henry gave him in a few words the substance of the missive, but declined to show this woman's letter, even to his most intimate friend.

Earlsfort laughed loud and long.

'She is doing you, old fellow—she is doing you. So she has taken a house in Mayfair, has she, and is coming the widow dodge over the natives?'

'I shall go and call on her to-morrow, and apologize for the treatment she received at Brinck Hall.'

'The devil you will!—then you will get into a mess. You had better stick to Mrs. Clive, even with the chance of having her husband's fingers on your throat. She is not half so dangerous; besides, these women are deadly foes, how the deuce can you keep friends with both of them?'

'Georgie must learn reason; I must talk to her. Madame d'Aubigné would be a far better friend for her than Mrs. Foublanque, and the women of that fast set she has taken up with lately.'

'Good gracious! Hal, you must be mad! These rival beauties between them have turned your brain. Any amount of fastness and slang is surely preferable to gambling and intrigue.'

'I must have Madame d'Aubigné's own version of that story, before I am willing to accept it in all its blackness. You know she is a foreigner, Dick, and foreign habits are not subject to the same code of moral laws which we English make.'

'By Jove! for a highly moral man you are coming it pretty strongly in excuses for your friend. Why, you good, worthy, unworldly people get into ten times more mischief than we poor sinners, for you don't seem to know a pitfall when it gapes wide open before you. If you are determined to go and visit this French syren, all I can say is, "beware."

She will let you in for something, or my name is not Dick Earlsfort.'

'Well, it will not be money, or she would not have returned the cheque.'

'Perhaps not ; she probably flies at higher game. She is a widow now, remember.'

'I shall never marry,' said Sir Henry, with a downcast look.

'So you think now, my friend, but "how happy could I be with either" will be your song ere long, I fancy ; and, as the one is free, the other out of reach, why there is no saying what may happen.'

'Confound it ! Dick, I wish you would not talk such infernal nonsense. But come and call with me at Lady Ida's to-day. I have not seen Mrs. Clive since she and her husband returned from the sea, a week since.'

'And you are half afraid to trust yourself to go there alone ? Come, then, I am your man.'

So, later in the afternoon, the two friends went to Lady Ida's together. Sir Henry had not omitted that other visit which he intended to pay alone, but he was informed by Jerome that the Comtesse d'Aubigné was 'not at home : ' thus he had to content himself by leaving the usual bit of pasteboard ; and probably he would not have been particularly gratified had he known that it was immediately taken up to Mathilde, who smiled as she tossed it into a card-plate.

'*Bien,*' she said ; 'explanations are always a bore. I will ask the heavy Baronet to-dinner, and he will come too, or I am much mistaken.'

When Sir Henry and Captain Earlsfort arrived at Lady Ida's, they found quite a large party assembled. Lady Ida was in her sphere ; it was a musical and literary afternoon. Georgie was indulging in some lively conversation with her old friend the poet, who, blindly ignorant of the fact that she was holding him up to ridicule, was being made thoroughly happy by his idol's having condescended to notice him for a brief space. Sir Henry Wilbraham's entrance, however, speedily put a stop to the poet's short-lived enjoyment.

'Welcome !' cried Georgie, when she saw him. 'This is good ! And you, too, Captain Earlsfort, why, I look upon you both as oases in the desert, as some of these clever

people would say. Everybody in this room being a lunatic—my respected mother included—imagine my delight at beholding two sane members of society !’

The poor poet heaved a deep sigh as he heard these words, and turned away, lest his *amour-propre* should receive a yet severer stab.

‘They don’t look mad—to the uninitiated, at least,’ said Dick Earlsfort, laughing.

‘Don’t they—well, I will just enlighten you a little as to what is going on, and I feel certain you will agree with me. You see that grave, sedate-looking man, and the Tom Thumb in the rusty coat by his side, talking to mamma?—well, they are deep in the subject of the advantages which would arise from Bengalee women being admitted to study in the universities. If you don’t call the idea of turning the black women blue a mad one, well, I do not know what is.’

‘There are a great many crazy notions afloat in the world just now,’ said Dick Earlsfort, laughing. ‘I have lately come back from Utah, and I could tell you some funny stories.’

‘Spare me, if you have any regard for me. If you had heard the subject discussed from a theoretical point of view, as I did here during one entire afternoon, you never would want to know any more of the plurality of wives, either theoretically or practically.’

‘You don’t mean to say that the *literati* trouble themselves about these subjects?’

‘You don’t know them, Captain Earlsfort. I tell you, you can form no idea of the amount of madness necessary to constitute a genius.’

‘Excuse me, but I am not so utterly ignorant as you imagine. I lately made the acquaintance of a certain Mrs. Baird.’

‘The arch-priestess of the clever functions! Then you must know something, if you have been talking to her. She never lets anyone off without some instruction, if it be only to give them some wise saws, which she plagiarises from Lord Bacon, or some other old dry-as-dust who has been dead for centuries.’

‘I should rather like to see this good lady of whom I have heard so much,’ said Sir Henry.

‘Your wish will in all probability be gratified, as I believe she is due here this afternoon.’

'*Parlez du diable on en voit la queue,*' laughed Earlsfort, as the door opened, and Mrs. Baird was announced. She was supposed to be in gala costume, but she was the quaintest-looking figure caricaturist ever poked fun at.

'Now you shall be introduced—come along Sir Henry,' cried Georgie, as soon as Mrs. Baird had been graciously received by the lady of the house.

'A learned friend of mine is most anxious to make your acquaintance,' she said, as she approached the Yankee widow, closely followed by Sir Henry. 'He has been devoting the last few months to the study of the philosophical system of Confucius, and is desirous to discuss its merits and demerits with you.'

Then she sped away, leaving Sir Henry to get out of the entanglement of this most extraordinary introduction as best he could. Earlsfort looked amused. His acquaintance with Georgie was but a recent one—in fact, he had never spoken to her till after her marriage; but he, like the rest, was rather taken by her saucy recklessness, and he could not help regretting the fate she had, as it were, made for herself, and he fervently wished she had been Wilbraham's wife. That dashing little lively beauty, he thought, would have speedily expunged his staidness and formalism, and have made him a brisker and a happier man. And they stood talking and laughing together, till Sir Henry, having succeeded in escaping from Mrs. Baird, came back shaking his finger threateningly at Georgie.

'Well, I hope you had some benefit?' she asked; 'did she give you a lecture in Chinese?'

'Upon my word, Mrs. Clive, you are too bad. She evidently took you at your word, and gave me such a learned dissertation, I did not know how to answer her.'

'"*Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin,*" and it was useless to introduce you without a flourish of trumpets; she would have sneered superciliously at you.'

'Yes, isn't a learned woman a bore, Hal?' suggested Earlsfort; 'she makes a fellow look such a fool!'

'You are right, Captain Earlsfort; you men always like ignoramuses best—that is why I am such a favourite.' And Georgie tossed her pretty little head.

'The compliment to yourself is such a doubtful one I scarcely know how to answer it, Mrs. Clive; so perhaps I

had better avoid any further discussion by paying my respects at the chair of wisdom ;' and he sauntered off to join the learned group assembled round Mrs. Baird.

'Did you enjoy your trip to the sea?' asked Sir Henry, when Earlsfort had left them. 'You are looking all the better for it.'

'Oh! yes, it was well enough; but I am so angry to-day. I am not prepared to look brightly on anything in life.'

'You are? Why, it struck me that you seemed in particularly good spirits.'

'You would not have me go about with my skeleton tied round my neck, would you?'

'That skeleton being?'

'My husband's short-comings.'

'Oh, Georgie, tell me—what new misfortune has happened?'

'You need not look so grave; he has not cut his throat, or forged, or done anything of that sort yet, though I know you think he will—but he has actually had the audacity to ask me to call on Madame d'Aubigné.'

'Well?'

'Don't say "well" in that sort of way, as if you thought it nothing. You do not suppose I am going to call on her, do you? No, I will die first.'

'What is the reason of this violent dislike you have taken to Madame d'Aubigné? As far as I can see, she seems a very pleasing, lady-like woman.'

'What! you know her too, do you?' and Georgie looked keenly at him.

'I have made her acquaintance very lately,' stammered Sir Henry, 'and I must acknowledge I do not understand the reason of your prejudice.'

'Perhaps it is only a woman's whim,' said Georgie; 'but you know the old verse,

'If she will she will, you may depend on't,
If she won't she won't, and there's an end on't.'

and that she won't is very certain as regards my calling on Madame d'Aubigné.'

'Then you acknowledge that you are disobliging your husband in this matter out of sheer obstinacy.'

‘There is another of your nasty words. I wish you would get a new dictionary, Sir Henry. From my point of view it is Oswald who is obstinate. Now, if you had a pretty little wife-like me, would you force on her intimacy a woman she particularly disliked, as I do Madame d’Aubigné?’

Sir Henry coloured, but did not answer; so Georgie went on in her coquettish, winning way, which was as gall and wormwood to her companion,

‘No, of course you would not. I see it in your eyes. Oh, Sir Henry, my marriage with Oswald was a mistake. Why did you let me do it? If you had been less dignified and grave about it, I should never have married him; but I believe I went on loving him simply to provoke you.’

‘Hush, Mrs. Clive; for Heaven’s sake, don’t speak in this strain! Never again let me hear such thoughtless words, or I shall be compelled to leave England and take some long travel, till you have learnt wisdom, and I have forgotten the past.’

‘Good gracious! I did not know you cared so much about it as all that,’ she said in a low voice.

‘If you were only happy,’ he whispered softly, ‘I could bear everything with patience.’

‘What a dear old saint you are! You try so hard to keep me straight! I have been so good for the last three weeks—I have done everything you told me, and borne with Oswald’s varieties of mood like an angel. In fact, we were becoming a second Philemon and Baucis, as the *sarans* would say, but this woman has entirely upset our equilibrium. There has been such a storm in the house this afternoon, I wonder there is any roof left, and Oswald has gone out in a perfect tornado of passion.’

‘Don’t you think it would be wiser if you were to give in? Madame d’Aubigné is, I fancy, an old friend of your husband’s.’

Georgie’s eyes gleamed.

‘Of course she is! If he did not care more for her than he does for me, he would not make such a fuss about my calling on her.’

‘You will perhaps make him do so, if you give such a trifle as leaving a card so serious a colouring.’

‘Pooh, you men are all alike! You think women are to have no self-will, but are to be mere puppets, ready to dance

at your good pleasure whenever you choose to pull the string.'

'No,' answered Sir Henry, quietly, 'such is far from my desire; but unless there be mutual accommodation to each other's wishes, there can never be mutual love.'

'What a fool I am ever to talk to you!' said Georgie; 'for you always try to persuade me against myself, and the nuisance is you generally succeed, too.'

'Not always, Georgie.'

The conversation was verging on dangerous ground, and it was well perhaps that the entrance of Clive put a stop to it.

'What! have you come back?' exclaimed Georgie, with a little toss when she saw him.

'Sooner than I was either expected or wanted, it seems,' he answered with a lowering brow, as he fixed his dark eyes on the Baronet. Sir Henry took the hint, and walked to the farther end of the room. Clive turned to his wife, 'You seem to have been amusing yourself during my absence, Mrs. Clive.'

'You should not have absented yourself, then,' was the saucy answer; 'you know the old proverb, when the cat is away the mice will play.'

'By Jove, I will not stand this sort of thing much longer!'

'My dear Oswald, do you see the room is full of company? And there is another proverb, which it would be as well to remember, about the efficacy of washing your dirty linen in private,' and Georgie looked cool and provoking.

'Confound your proverbs, you are without exception the most "riling" woman I ever came across!'

But his wife had gone to take refuge near her mother's chair. Clive had a sort of respect for Lady Ida, and generally managed to control his worst tempers when in her presence.

'He went out in a vile humour, but he has come home in a worse one,' whispered Georgie to Sir Henry, as she passed him.

He did not venture to answer her, but shortly afterwards, making a sign to Earlsfort, they both took their leave.

'That poor little girl is not to be envied her life with that great ill-tempered brute,' observed Dick, when they were fairly in the street.

'Ah! it is a miserable business altogether,' answered Sir Henry. 'I shall not go back there any more at present.'

‘Why? What has happened?’

‘Nothing particular; but I think my presence produces discord. I would go abroad for awhile, only I don’t like to be out of reach if anything very wrong happens. Will you come down to Brinck Hall for a few days? I do not think you are as averse as you once were to a little country campaigning.’

‘With pleasure. Let me see, this is Tuesday. I am engaged to a dinner party to-morrow; but on Thursday I shall be delighted to accompany you.’

‘So be it, then. I will write to my mother, and tell her to expect us for some little time, eh?’

‘As long as you like.’

The storm at Lady Ida’s had only just begun, and was not likely to have a speedy termination. No sooner had the various representatives of literature and art dispersed themselves, than it reached its climax. Disregardful of Lady Ida, who had never witnessed a serious squabble between Georgie and her husband, Clive attacked his wife. Certain inuendoes of Madame d’Aubigné’s had not failed in effect; and they rose vividly in his mind when he saw the confidential *tête-à-tête* which was going on between Georgie and Sir Henry. He was not given to the exercise of much self-control; and on the present occasion he did not even attempt to stem the violence of his rage. Georgie, who, on her side, thought she had an equal cause for complaint, was not in the least abashed. She did not lose her temper, but, on the contrary, she fed the violence of Clive’s by being particularly smiling and placid; while she gave utterance to little stinging, provoking answers. Poor Lady Ida was completely overcome; she could not think what it all meant. Why the presence of Sir Henry Wilbraham should evoke such a torrent of words she could not understand.

‘They have known each other since Georgie was a baby, my dear Oswald. You must be mad to be jealous about him,’ she observed, as soon as she could manage to make herself heard.

‘They have known each other so long that they succeed in making themselves pretty well talked of. Why the devil Georgie did not marry him, and leave me at peace, I don’t know.’

‘Because there is no peace for the wicked, *caro mio*,’ said

his wife. 'It was necessary for your spiritual good that you should have a plague; and the gods sent me. Acknowledge that they kindly allowed you to have your punishment in a pretty form.' And she looked coquettishly in the looking-glass.

'Georgie, Georgie, when you see your husband is really annoyed with you, you surely might be serious for a moment, my child.'

'I am quite as angry with him as he can be with me, mamma; and when he has finished his tempestuous harangue, I mean to begin mine. I shall have more chance when he is a little tired.'

'Now, Lady Ida, I appeal to you. Is her conduct not provoking enough to make one feel inclined to strike her?' said Clive, almost beside himself with rage.

'I have no doubt you find Madame d'Aubigné more conciliatory. It is well that I have made up my mind not to visit her—she might catch some of my genius for tormenting. Sharp sayings, like fevers, are rather infectious.'

'You really, then, do not intend to obey my wishes, and call on my old friend?'

'Decidedly and positively not. When I call on Madame d'Aubigné, you will drag me there by the hair of my head.'

'Come, come,' said Lady Ida, 'I never thought I should live to hear you two quarrel. You have really made me quite ill. My dear Georgie, why can you not do as your husband wishes?—you were always too wilful, my child.'

'Call on his female friends!—no, mother, that I will *not* do. In this instance I do intend to be very wilful; and my dear, good, ill-tempered husband has my full permission to do his worst.' And with this she walked out of the room, slamming the door pretty smartly after her.





CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STRIFE CULMINATES.

LADY IDA was sitting in the drawing-room about an hour after the *fracas*, when Georgie entered.

‘Where is Oswald, mamma?’ she asked.

‘Gone out to dinner, I believe, my child. Did you not know that he was going?’

‘I? No, I know nothing whatever of his movements. This life is growing past all endurance, mother,’ she said, as she sat down, in her favourite position, on a low footstool at Lady Ida’s feet.

The fond mother leant over her and kissed her tenderly.

‘My Georgie, you chose it for yourself. You have no one else to blame.’

‘Yes, I have—I have Oswald to blame. Why does he treat me thus? Am I not his wife? And what right has he to ask me to associate with this woman, whom I know he prefers before me? If he chooses to go and see her himself, it is bad enough; but to ask me to accept her as a friend is very, very much too bad!’ and Georgie began to cry.

‘My dear child, don’t you think a great part of this story exists solely in your own imagination? I am sure Oswald is very fond of you; only you know, Georgie dear, you are very provoking with him sometimes. You expect all the deference and homage to come from him, while you yourself assert your independence like a little queen. I wish you had married Sir Henry Wilbraham, my darling; he would have managed you so much better.’

‘And so do I, with all my heart, mamma; only it is of no use to talk about that now. Poor, dear Sir Henry!—he is a good old saint, and would have put up with my little vagaries. Oswald and I are both such horrid sinners, we shall never get on together.’

‘ You must try to give in a little more to your husband’s wishes, my dear Georgie.’

‘ Now, mamma, for goodness’ sake, don’t you begin to preach ! Sir Henry has preached me nearly stupid on the subject, and the more I try to keep things smooth, the less I succeed ; so I intend to go my own way, and let Oswald go his, for the future. I could have stood his ill-temper, and have sought to spoon him back again into a good-humour ; but, if I am to be twitted perpetually with that horrid Madame d’Aubigné, I know I shall do some fearful thing.’

‘ After you went upstairs Oswald continued to be very angry, and, for the sake of peace, I promised I would call on her to-morrow.’

‘ You did ! Oh ! mother,’ and Georgie sprang up, ‘ if you are against me too, and are going to take part with Oswald and this woman, all has indeed come to an end, and the sooner I am put into an early grave the better.’

‘ Georgie, don’t talk in that horrid strain. Oh, dear ! oh, dear ! what a fool I have been to give you your own way all your life ! If I had been more severe with you, you would not be so wilful now, my child.’ And the poor old mother looked very perturbed and anxious. ‘ Well may it be said that the most appalling chapter in human life is that which has for its heading, “ The fulfilment of every wish.” You have had everything you can desire, my child, and what has it produced ? Nothing but misery and unhappiness, as far as I can see.’

‘ That is right ; go on, mother mine, cover up the bright lights in the picture with the very blackest of black chalk,’ said Georgie, laughing. Her natural vivacity must peep out, even in the midst of her trouble and annoyance. ‘ Let us hope that all is not to be darkness and misery just yet. If I am destined to fight, for the rest of my life, with Oswald and this beautiful French woman, simply as a punishment for having married him in a moment of infatuation, why, the sooner one breaks one’s foolish little neck the better.’

‘ As your aunt Sophy would say, submission is the first lesson which should be taught a woman, if she would lead a happy life. You have never learnt it, dear Georgie.’

‘ No, indeed !—and, what is more, I do not intend to be taught. Do you think I will allow myself to be instructed in submission by Oswald and his female chums ? Oh !

mother, the very thought drives me mad !' And she began to walk up and down the room in the most excited manner. ' I wonder where he has gone to-night ?' she continued. ' If I thought he had gone to dine with that odious woman, I would leave this house and him for ever !'

' Georgie, Georgie, do pray come and sit down, and be a little bit reasonable and quiet. You are making me quite ill. I have a very important committee to attend to-morrow morning, and I shall be totally unfit to go if you continue to behave thus. You are labouring under excitement, my child, and are consequently magnifying your husband's conduct. I fancy he has only gone to the Club, because he was provoked by your disobedience.'

' My disobedience will provoke him a little more before I have done. He is not going to ride rough-shod over me, and then dare to accuse me of flirting with Sir Henry Wilbraham, as a sort of cloak to cover his own shortcomings. But you shall not be worried any more with these matters, dear mother. I acted for myself in marrying Oswald, and I will act for myself to the end.' And she threw her arms round her mother's neck and kissed her affectionately.

' Ever wilful—oh ! Georgie, Georgie !' said the mother, as she returned her daughter's embrace.

' Well, never mind my wilfulness now. Let us forget for an hour or two that I have ever been married at all, and let me be your little spoiled pet Georgie once more. We will have a cosy dinner together, and then we will sit by the fire, and you shall tell me all about your last new theory, and what electric lights the *sarans* cast upon the face of affairs to-day. Poor old Mrs. Baird ! learning has not fattened her, and she looks more like congealed vinegar than ever ! People say that excessive learning and excessive piety generally contrive to make their possessors look uncomfortably disagreeable ; but with my increasing knowledge of worldly affairs, I am beginning to think that it is your sham saints and sham blues whom this rule affects. I never had much faith in Mrs. Baird ; it would not take an excess of cleverness to get at the bottom of her skin-deep erudition. Now, dear old Sir Henry Wilbraham, I know he is a true saint, and he always looks pleasant and cheerful.'

Thus Georgie prattled on, as though she had entirely forgotten the very existence of her husband or of his short-

comings, and the evening passed quickly and happily. The mother and daughter had not had a *tête-à-tête* for many a long day now ; and that Georgie, with all her faults, dearly loved her kind, indulgent mother, there is little doubt, though with her utter recklessness and thoughtless disregard for the feelings of others, she did not scruple, by her actions, frequently to annoy and wound her.

At last Lady Ida, who was growing weary, suggested that it was time to retire for the night.

‘ You go to bed, mother dear. I shall sit up till Oswald comes home.’

‘ Oh ! Georgie, you are not going to have any farther dispute with him ?’

‘ Never mind ; you go to bed, mamma, and then, if there be a row, you will not hear it.’

‘ My child, this is so very foolish ; depend upon it all this quarrelling with your husband will have a fearful end.’

‘ Who said there was going to be a quarrel ? It rests entirely with Oswald. Nothing he does is likely to make me angry, save his preference for Madame d’Aubigné ; so go and sleep, *cara madre*—I will take care of myself.’

Thus Lady Ida was induced to retire to her room, and Georgie, book in hand, curled herself up comfortably in a large arm-chair to await her husband’s return. Eleven o’clock struck soon after Lady Ida left her—twelve—one—and yet he came not, and pretty Georgie yawned, and began to look pale and weary with her long watch. Not till a few minutes before two did she hear him enter the house. She rose, and shaking herself to get rid of every appearance of sleepiness, she went out to meet him.

‘ What, are you still up ? Why the deuce did you not go to bed ?’ was the rough question.

‘ I waited to see you, dear.’

‘ You need not have given yourself the trouble. What an infernally cold night it is !’

‘ Come in here and warm yourself—there is a nice fire.’

Oswald followed her suggestion, and stood over the fire in silence for a few minutes. Georgie watched him, for there was a pale, haggard look about his face, and a glaring wildness in his eye, which she had not seen since the night in Paris, when her entrance had arrested the work of self-destruction. She was almost afraid to speak. Oswald, in

his fits of irritability and ill-temper, she set at naught; but Oswald in one of his morose, dark moods, she rather feared, and she dreaded lest one of these should be upon him now.

'Georgie,' he said, after leaning against the mantelpiece for some moments, 'I am very sorry you sat up. If I should be late, I beg you will never do it again.'

'Why not, Oswald? I like to sit up—you might want something.'

'Whatever I want I can get for myself. Do you understand me?—this is not to be repeated. Do not be disobedient about everything.'

'Are you going to be late very often then? Where have you been to-night?'

'Is it necessary that I should tell you wherever I go? Good heavens! marriage is a state of bondage, if one is bound to be responsible for every action! A Benedick is more under control than a schoolboy.'

'I shall go where I like, then,' said Georgie pertly, 'and you shall not question me. I gave up going out and amusing myself with my friends because you seemed to disapprove of it, but I shall not stop at home any longer.'

'You seem entirely to forget, or to ignore the different social relations which exist between men and women, Mrs. Clive. Things which I might do with impunity would bring down the condemnation of the whole world on you.'

'Then all I can say is, it is a great shame that it should be so. If I speak two or three times to the same man I am called a flirt and a coquette, yet you may have half a dozen loves, and it is only considered rather *chic* . Yet the same marriage vows are binding on us both. Tell me, Oswald, where you have been to-night? Recollect, I have a right to know.'

'The knowledge would be of no advantage to you. You had better amuse yourself with your dress and your needlework, and leave me to take care of myself.'

Georgie was nettled.

'Am I a fool in your eyes, as well as a plaything you are tired of, that you talk to me like this? I insist on knowing where you have been to-night!'

He took a roll of bank-notes from his pocket, and threw them on the table before her.

'Playing!' she said. 'Oh! if you have begun that

again, there will be no keeping you within bounds; and I suppose the end of it will be that my poor dear mother will be left without a home in order to pay your gambling debts. But it shall not be so. I have been very wilful and undutiful in marrying you, but recollect, the last years of my mother's life shall not suffer from it. You may lie in a prison, and starve there, before I ask her for one penny to pay your debts. Do you understand what I say?'

'Stop these heroics, Georgie, and don't make a fool of yourself. What the devil has come to you? A short time back you used rather to encourage play than otherwise.'

'I am learning wisdom with increasing years; and I am beginning to see the misery to which all this recklessness will lead.'

'I suppose Wilbraham has been instilling some of his canting principles into you?'

'If your principles were only half as staunch and good as Sir Henry Wilbraham's, there would not be much cause for complaint against you.'

Clive laughed. His gains had put him in a good humour; though the excitement of play had produced that strange hunted look which his face always assumed when under the influence of strong emotion. Georgie watched him as he gathered up his winnings, and returned them to his note-book.

'You have not told me,' she said, 'where you have been to get all this money? They do not play so high at the Club, I fancy.'

He did not answer for a moment; then he looked at his wife with a sort of defiant smile, and said quietly,

'I have been dining at Madame d'Aubigné's. There were several men there I knew, and we played cards after dinner.'

In an instant Georgie became as pale as death—so pale that Clive put out his arm to support her, for she looked as though she were going to faint; but she sprang out of his reach, and the colour came back with a crimson rush.

'Well, you would not call on her, or we might have dined there together,' said Clive, as though he thought the subject required a little self-justification, for Georgie had not yet spoken—she had only looked her indignation.

'Oswald, you must be mad!' she said at last, uttering

very quickly, as though she were rapidly losing all control over both her words and actions, 'or you would not insult me in this barefaced, insolent way! Whom do you take me for, and what do you take me for, that you imagine I will bear this treatment quietly? Most men have some little respect for their wives, but you behave with a disregard for my feelings which is almost past belief.'

'Madame d'Aubigné is a lady, as well born and as well educated as yourself. Your refusing to visit her is, in my opinion, an insult to her.'

'I care not for her birth, though she were born a princess; she is a bad, designing woman. All I can say is, it is a pity you did not marry her, instead of marring my happiness, and then you could have travelled down into the depths of infamy together.'

'Upon my word, Mrs. Clive, you are becoming quite amusing in your jealousy,' said Oswald, with a jeering laugh.

Georgie stamped her foot, and looked a perfect little fury.

'Don't mock me,' she said, 'for I am thoroughly in earnest, and I am jealous of nothing but my *amour-propre*, which has been wounded. I do not choose to be pointed and sneered at as the hoodwinked, tame Mrs. Clive.'

'Tame! No one would be likely to call you tame if they had the pleasure of seeing you in the tantrums you bestow on me.'

'Silence, sir! The time has come for you to make a final choice. Do you intend to give up this Madame d'Aubigné, and to promise me that you will see her no more?'

'My dear Georgie, do pray go to bed, and leave the rest of this discussion till the morning. You are excited to a most ridiculous degree.'

'I will do no such thing. Answer my question instantly! Do you intend to give up your acquaintance with this woman?'

'I should say certainly not,' answered Oswald, looking very cool and *nonchalant*. They had a way of taking turns in coolness and fury, had this ill-assorted couple, which added considerably to their mutual anger.

'Madame d'Aubigné is a very old friend of mine,' he went on, 'and is very useful to me in many ways. I have

not the slightest intention of dropping her acquaintance for these mere babyish whims of yours.'

'Even should this babyish whim, as you call it, lead to our separation—you still would not care perhaps?'

'I have not viewed the subject in so absurd and improbable a light. I shall certainly not give up my friendship for poor Mathilde. Why, she stood my friend long before I had even heard of you, and has fought my way for me through many a dark lane.'

'Enough, Mr. Clive; then she can go on fighting for you to the end. I will not dispute the honour with her, nor trouble my head any farther about your affairs or yourself.'

And with this, Georgie left him, and took refuge in a little room off the staircase, which had for years been regarded as her private sanctum. She locked the door, and, throwing herself on the sofa, gave way to woman's never-failing remedy, a flood of tears. Weeping for women seems to be what smoking is for men, a sort of antidote to strong excitement, for Clive lighted his quaint old pipe after Georgie's departure, and sat down in front of the fire.

He did not feel altogether comfortable over the occurrences of the last few hours. Clive was easily induced to do bad and foolish things, and then, like many weak people, he brooded over and regretted them afterwards. He was considerably irritated and annoyed by Georgie's obstinate determination of purpose, but at the same time he could not bring his mind to think that she had been altogether quite fairly dealt with. He could not possibly give up Mathilde d'Aubigné; he had been too much indebted to her in the past, and she was too useful to him in the present, for him to think of such a thing. Besides, there was just that something about Mathilde's calm superiority in all matters concerning worldly knowledge which had a strong and lasting influence over a man like Clive. He wanted some one he could lean on, and from whom he could seek advice. Poor little Georgie, with her vivacious prattle, was amusing enough as a plaything to pet and caress while the fever lasted, but she could in no way fill the void in the man's character, or lead him, as a woman with more tact and knowledge would have done, for good or for evil, according to the power by which she herself was guided.

'The present state of affairs was very provoking and

irritating,' he thought, as he sat and smoked quietly on, but he supposed they would shake themselves into position, as things generally did. He would leave Georgie alone for a time, and her ill-temper would probably wear itself out. So he heaped more and more coals on the fire, and went on smoking, till he heard the servants begin to busy themselves about the house. He opened the shutters and found it was already quite daylight, so he thought he would go upstairs and see if Georgie was asleep. To his no small surprise she was not to be found; but that she had most likely sought refuge in Lady Ida's room was his next conjecture. Thus he troubled himself no farther about the matter, but throwing himself on the sofa in his dressing-room, was soon in a sound sleep. For hours he slept on, till it was long past the usual breakfast time. When at last he did come down, he found that Lady Ida had neither seen nor heard aught of his wife; but on cross-questioning the servants, it was discovered that she had gone out soon after nine o'clock, and had not yet returned.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE BRINK.

SIR HENRY WILBRAHAM'S bachelor quarters in London are replete with every comfort. The Baronet has just pushed back the table with its well-appointed breakfast service, and has seated himself in front of the fire to enjoy his morning 'Times,' when his valet enters, with the soft mysterious tread peculiar to his race. Having carefully closed the door, he informs his master, in a half-whisper, that a lady is outside, very persistent in her desire to see him immediately. Visions of Mathilde, having come to take bodily possession of him, rise unpleasantly before him.

'What is she like?' he asks the servant anxiously.

'I cannot see her face, sir, she is thickly veiled; but she is slight, with very fair hair.'

'Show her in instantly, and let there be no interruptions,' and Sir Henry grew white and agitated. In another moment his unexpected visitor was in the room, and the veil was taken off.

'Georgie—Mrs. Clive,' he exclaimed, 'what has happened to bring you here?'

'Don't look so bewildered,' she said, half-laughing, 'I have come to stop with you.'

'What do you mean? It is carrying thoughtlessness too far, to play at ball with your reputation for a mere joke, my child.'

'I never was more serious in my life,' said Georgie, 'you may turn me out in the street if you choose, but I will never go back to Oswald.'

Sir Henry was speechless with dismay. He looked at her with a vacant stare for a few minutes. The dilemma in

which he found himself was no enviable one, and vague notions of what he ought to do chased each other through his brain, but took no tangible shape.

‘To what has your wilfulness brought you, my poor child?’ he said at last, looking very lovingly and pityingly at Georgie.

‘To you, where I wish it had brought me long ago,’ she answered, as she laid her pretty head with its wavy curls on his shoulder; ‘you will protect me—you will not desert me and leave me to endure Oswald’s insults—oh! Henry, I have been so very miserable!’

‘My darling Georgie!’ and the strong arm was thrown round the little fragile form.

For a few seconds they remained locked in each other’s arms. Sir Henry was the first to recover his reason, and then he thrust her from him with a fierceness which was a new feature in his usually undemonstrative nature.

‘What demon of madness has possessed us both?’ he cried. ‘Georgie, you must leave this house at once!’

‘No, no—do not send me away,’ she pleaded—‘let me be with you. I am so wretched at home, and I shall be quite happy with you. What difference can it make to me whether the world be pleased or not? I don’t care for people’s remarks; they have always something disagreeable to say whatever one does. Oh! Henry, dear Henry, do not ask me to go back and face Oswald’s fury!’

‘The God of love and mercy give me strength and wisdom!’ said Sir Henry, fervently, as he threw himself in a chair, and buried his head in his hands, as though in silent prayer, while his whole frame heaved convulsively.

Georgie stood and watched him in surprise at the storm her waywardness had evoked. To her thoughtless, shallow nature, the frenzied workings of a passionate heart, warring and struggling against itself, were totally incomprehensible. Georgie always followed her first impulse, without counting the cost either to herself or to anyone else. She had taken it into her foolish little head that she could put up with her husband’s behaviour no longer, and that she must come off to Sir Henry. She never thought of the time when, robbed of the blossoms which could never flower again, she would hopelessly bewail their lost fragrance. No, this pretty little gaudy butterfly lived only in the sunshine and warmth of the fleeting moment, and gave no heed to any dark clouds which

might arise to dash her gauzy wings in the future. But Sir Henry, with his strong sense of right and wrong, looked on things from a very different point of view, though his mind was distracted and torn with contending emotions, and he knew not what was best to be done. Be it remembered, he loved Georgie very dearly, and he could scarcely find it in his heart to ask her to go back to the man whom he himself regarded as a brute and a blackguard.

There was a long silence. At last Georgie knelt down at his feet, and tried to pull his hand away from his face.

‘Dear Henry, what am I to do?’ she asked. ‘You are the arbiter of my fate—only do not ask me to go back to Oswald.’

Sir Henry dropped one hand, which strayed as though unbidden round Georgie; but he would not look at her, and determinedly kept his eyes covered as he said slowly,

‘We must part at once, my child, to meet in this world no more, till time and age have worn out each scintilla of the love which now exists between us. I have been to blame—thoroughly, miserably to blame. I was strong, and knew something of the dangers which beset the human heart; you were weak and ignorant, poor child! May God forgive my great sin, and help me to redeem the past ere it be too late!’

‘Henry,’ cried Georgie, bursting into tears, ‘you cannot mean what you are saying!—you are not going away to leave me alone! Why, Oswald will kill me! You can never be so unkind!’

‘Your reputation is dearer to me than even your life, dear Georgie. There is no other course left open to either of us.’

‘Oh! take me with you! Let us go abroad together—let us live among the Circassians or Russians, or some strange people, where no one will know us. I shall be so happy with you, and Oswald will not miss me.’

Sir Henry turned round and looked at her for a moment, and the tears were in his eyes.

‘How high is the price of honour!’ he said, as he raised her gently from her kneeling position; ‘but, cost what it will, it must be paid. Dear Georgie, we must both learn to suffer and be patient.’

‘I will not go back to the house in Mayfair, if that be what you mean,’ said Georgie, looking rather bewildered at the earnest calmness of his manner. ‘I shall go away into

the deepest recesses of Bohemian life, and neither you nor Oswald shall ever hear of me again.'

'My child! my own Georgie, you will not be unreasonable, and make my burden heavier to bear!'

'Your burden, Sir Henry! It seems you have transferred the whole weight of it to my shoulders, and decline to carry any part of it. No, I shall not even say good-bye to you, but shall go off and do the best I can for myself. There is nothing like cutting out one's pathway in life and disregarding every hazard;' and she went towards the door.

He strode quickly after her, and seizing her by both hands, brought her back again.

'Georgie, this must not be!' he said. 'It were better you should remain here with me, than go forth unprotected to contend with the difficulties and temptations of the world. You do not know what you are talking of, poor child, or you would not contemplate so rash a step.'

'I will carry it out, though,' said Georgie, smiling through the tears which still hung on her long lashes; 'you know how wilful I can be.'

'Alas, too well!' he answered, looking round the room the while, as though for his hat.

'Where are you going, Sir Henry?'

'To ask Lady Ida to come here at once.'

'On your return you will find the bird flown. You do not suppose mamma will come without Oswald; and I am not quite such a fool as to sit and wait for them.'

'Will you go to your aunt, Lady Bowyer, till the storm has blown over, and something has been arranged?'

'Most decidedly not. She would preach to me all day and all night, till I should be forced to run away from her. Why don't you suggest that I should go to Madame d'Aubigné at once—anywhere, in fact, as long as you get rid of me? Let me be off on my own account, for mercy's sake, and then I can please myself as to my whereabouts.'

'Oh, Georgie, pray do not talk thus! You know how willingly, how gladly I would help you. It is for your own sake, my darling, that it must not be. It is very hard to bring reason to bear against the strong cravings of one's heart—especially with you, too, against me, Georgie.'

'Poor dear old saint! I am sorry I have brought you such a terrible fence to take; but a love-passagè between a

saint and a sinner must, I suppose, of necessity come to grief.'

Sir Henry did not answer this flippant little sally—he was in deep thought.

'I have but one other suggestion to make,' he said at last; 'will you go down to Brinck Hall, and stay with mother and Glory?'

'Yes; if you will come with me,' she answered, quickly.

'My dear child, that cannot be; every law, both divine and social, cries out against it. It is most necessary, for the sake of your reputation, that I should remain in town.'

'Pooh! you are far more careful of my reputation than I am myself. I tell you I do not care one single iota what the world says.'

'So you fancy now, dear Georgie, but we must live beyond the present moment, my sweet love; and I cannot bear even to think of the day when, in tears and sorrow, you would curse me for having given way to weakness now.'

'Well, do as you like—you always manage to have your own way, so propound your plans; ' and Georgie sat down in an arm-chair, with a sort of comic look of resignation, which was very pretty and taking, but totally at variance with the seriousness of the subject under discussion.

'I will take you to the station at once, and telegraph to my mother to send a carriage to meet you. You will, at all events, have peace and quietude for a few days; and we must hope that these miserable differences will be made up.'

'Never—nothing will induce me to go back to Mr. Clive.'

'Hush! dear Georgie—don't be rash and impetuous; and now, before you go, you must promise me one thing. I think I can trust you to keep sacred a promise made to me; ' and he looked at her tenderly.

For answer she kissed his hand, which hung over her chair.

'You will not leave Brinck Hall, or attempt to face the great world alone, without first letting me know?'

Sir Henry had a righteous horror of any one he cared for being a victim to unprotected femalism, and thus becoming a prey to any adventurer who might chance to be fascinated by her.

'I will stop there,' she said, 'as long as Lady Wilbraham

will have me ; unless Oswald should come—then I shall run away at once.’

‘Not if he promise to give up Madame d’Aubigné.’

‘Yes—it is too late now ; he has insulted me. But I will let you know my whereabouts, dear Henry. You have not told me what I am to say to your mother when I drop down on her in this unexpected fashion.’

‘Tell her the truth, Georgie. You will find her kind and sympathizing.’

‘Very likely ; but, on second thoughts, I have not the slightest intention of facing your relations at Brinck Hall, unless you come with me to explain why I am there. You may return to town by the next train, if you are so very scrupulous over the proprieties ; but take me down there you must and shall !’

‘Georgie, why do you ask me to do things which my better reason forbids?’

‘Surely, Sir Henry, you must be sickening for a nervous fever, or you would not be so absurd this morning. Have we never gone anywhere together before, that the world should raise an outcry about this little journey to-day? Come, send that sneaky, methodistical-looking man of yours for a cab, and let us be off.’

Sir Henry rang, and gave the requisite order. Until it was attended to but few words were spoken. He was absorbed by his thoughts, and seemed almost crushed by the events of the morning. A man of Sir Henry’s temperament could not regard this little episode with nonchalance and levity. He felt too seriously and earnestly the grave responsibilities of life ; and though he loved Georgie deeply and devotedly, yet that only tended to make him recognize more fully how very much depended on his power of self-command. Even the announcement that a cab was waiting did not rouse him from the reverie into which he had fallen, till Georgie’s little merry laugh fell on his ear.

‘Come along, poor old Henry,’ she said in her purring voice, as she stood beside him. ‘I believe, after all, you are loth to part with me, and would rather keep me here.’

He started up as though he had been stung, and seized her by both hands.

‘Why were women sent to tempt men to sin?’ he said, almost fiercely.

‘To give them the chance of being superior, and strong, and noble, like unto gods,’ she answered, in her careless, chaffy way. ‘Poor old dear, I am sure you ought to be rewarded for all this goodness—for acknowledge, now, it costs you some little effort to send me away in this barbarous, cruel fashion, when we might both be so happy together.’

Poor little Georgie ! to what had a long career of thoughtlessness and wilfulness brought her ! It was not that she was bad or vicious by nature, but, like a spoiled child, she had been accustomed to have everything she wanted, and to have her slightest whims pampered ; and her caprices were as changeable as the wind. Of religious training she had had none ; and no one save Sir Henry himself had ever sought to inculcate high principles in her young mind. Was it, then, very strange that this wayward, untutored child should fly to him as an adviser and a friend in the moment of trouble, and cling to him for the love and comfort she had failed to find with Oswald Clive ?

He rose from his seat, and looked at her pityingly and tenderly. ‘Come, Georgie, let us go at once,’ he said.

When they arrived at the Waterloo Station, they found a train would start in about ten minutes. Georgie, with her usual perversity, declined to remain quietly in the waiting-room, but insisted on walking up and down the platform with Sir Henry. They had often been seen together in public, she said ; why should he mind it now ? Besides, as he intended to return to town again so soon, she wished to have as much as possible of his society. A few turns, however, were more than enough for her.

‘Don’t let us go down there any more,’ she said ; ‘there is a horrid man there, who stares at me every time I pass, in the rudest manner. I am sure you ought to be very glad you came with me. He would have insulted me had I been alone.’

‘You had better get into the carriage at once.’

She did as he suggested, and Sir Henry stood by the door, till it should be nearer the time for the train to start. A gentleman passed, and they nodded to each other, as is the habit of men.

‘Who is he ?’ asked Georgie. ‘That is the man who stared so rudely at me.’

‘He is a man I meet frequently at the “Raleigh ;” but,

for the life of me, I cannot recollect his name,' said Sir Henry, as he got into the carriage. 'It is like his impudence to stare at you, or at any lady who happens to be with me.'

The train, however, now began to move, and, as the offending gentleman did not seem to be travelling by it, neither Georgie nor Sir Henry thought any more about him.

Some hours later in the day, Captain Earlsfort rang the bell at Sir Henry's chambers; it was answered by the quiet, dignified valet. His mysterious look when he informed him that his master was not at home roused Earlsfort's suspicions.

'Do you know where he has gone?' he asked; though he scarcely expected an affirmative answer, for the man had but lately entered Sir Henry's service, and was by no means in his master's confidence.

'I wish I did, sir,' he answered, promptly. 'When he do come back—if ever he do—I shall think it my duty to give him immediate warning. I understood, when I took this 'ere situation, that Sir 'Enery was a religious, gospel-minded man; but I have been miserably mistook, and, for the sake of my own soul, I shall take the earliest opportunity of quitting this 'ere un'allowed 'ouse!'

Earlsfort burst out laughing.

'Come inside,' he said, 'and let us hear what all this means.'

'Some servants would say, sir, that a master's secrets should be hinviolat; but the cause of the Lord is, to my mind, of more importance than these 'ere trumpery love-follies in which he indulges.'

'You expected to be paid to hold your tongue, I presume. Well, go on; your master has no secrets from me. Let us have this story in plain English, without any cant. Where has your master gone?'

'To the Waterloo Station,' the man answered, surlily, but little pleased with Earlsfort's off-hand brusquerie.

'Well, why the devil can't you go on? There is nothing very extraordinary in that, I suppose?'

'He did not go alone, sir. A veiled female came here pretty early this morning, had a long interview with Sir 'Enery, and they went away together.'

Captain Earlsfort gave a long whistle.

'In the toils! By Jove, I did not expect this!' he said, half to himself. Then he seated himself by the fire and

crossed his legs, as he adopted a comfortable position. 'Pray may I ask to how many of your acquaintance you have carried this ridiculous story in the course of the day?' he said, coolly.

'I have not been out,' answered the man. 'I have been reading the Holy Word, and trying to bring my mind back to a state of calm, after the hexcessive twist it received from witnessing the hiniquities which took place in this 'ere 'ouse this morning.'

'That you have been rummaging your master's papers, and trying to enlighten your mind about his private affairs, is far more likely, you confounded scoundrel! Why is that desk open, and why are those papers littering about? Untidiness is not Sir Henry's habit.'

'Lord, sir! you don't go a-suspecting me? Sir 'Enery went out in such a hurry this morning, he did not stop for nothin'.'

But the pious-minded individual coloured up, as though Earlsfort's shaft had not been entirely aimless.

'I would not give much for the length of your service when your master comes back,' said Earlsfort. 'Give me a light and the newspaper; I shall stay here for half-an-hour or so.'

The man did as he was desired, but still loitered about the room.

'I can dispense with your services. Go and read your Bible in your own apartment. The passages against lying and hypocrisy I should recommend to your particular notice.'

'Here is a devil of a row! said Earlsfort to himself, as soon as the man had left the room. 'I wonder what the deuce is to be done next? Why, Wilbraham wants more looking after than a baby in long clothes! That blessed Madame d'Aubigné, what is she up to now? That infernal beast of a servant, too! I suppose I had better lock up and seal these rooms, to prevent him from pilfering the chattels, and making free with the correspondence of his master. He seems to have been pretty busy already. What an ass Wilbraham is! Why did he not send to me?'

And Earlsfort began to walk about the room and take a general survey. Every moment he got more and more annoyed and irritated at what he deemed the excessive folly of an unworldly man, allowing himself to be led away by an

intriguing, designing woman ; and in his rage he kicked the sofa back from its position by the fire place. Something glittered on the carpet at his feet. He picked it up, and an exclamation of surprise fell from his lips as he did so. It was a locket of peculiar form and workmanship.

‘Mrs. Clive’s!—I saw it on her neck yesterday. My poor, dear Hal, you have passed the Rubicon now!’ Then he laughed pleasantly to himself. ‘Hal Wilbraham go off with another man’s wife!—the idea is too absurd! But what the very deuce does all this mean, I wonder?’


And he smoked vigorously at his cigar, as if he hoped thereby to enlighten his mind on this mysterious business. For a long time he sat smoking there, too much knocked over by astonishment to take any very active measures, though he felt something ought to be done ; but for once Dick Earlsfort was nonplussed, and inclined to let things take their own course. He is presently startled, however, by hearing a latchkey applied to the lock of the outer door ; he has only time to put the locket, which was on the table, out of sight in his waistcoat pocket, when Wilbraham himself walked into the room.





CHAPTER XXIX.

FEMME GAGNE.

 UEEEN of Bohemians, I salute thee!' said Cis Trelawny, gaily, as he entered Madame d'Aubigné's drawing-room on the day following her first dinner-party.

Mathilde knitted her brows. She aspired to higher social standing, and the title failed to please her.

'You won your money last night, or your compliments would not take such high flight this morning,' she answered, somewhat sharply.

'If I have offended, forgive me; but truly you are the queen of fête-givers. Last night's entertainment was quite *fêrique*; it will live in my memory for many a long day to come.'

'As long as the gold it produced remains in your pockets, eh?' said Mathilde, recovering her good humour. 'It is astonishing how the ups or downs of luck affect our spirits after a night of play, my dear Cis. None of the losers will come to kiss hands at my throne this afternoon—of that you may be very sure.'

'Delannoy, for instance. *Diantre!* we bled him pretty freely last night. I hope he won't take his revenge, or we poor paupers will be clean swept and garnished.'

'He is an insufferable snob!' said Mathilde; 'but for his money, he would not have been here; it is, therefore, only fair that he should leave some of it behind him.'

'True, when a man like that, so plainly labelled with a trade-mark, ventures into the arena of sport with gentlemen, what can he expect? Should we associate with *canaille* save for advantages to be derived?'

And this elegant specimen of the *jeunesse dorée* twirled his silken moustache, and lounged back in his chair, as though the beautiful world, with all its luxuries, were made but for him, and the great crowd of workers and toilers, with their strong brains and honest hands, were but created to minister to his selfish appetites. Mathilde looked at him and smiled; she had a good deal of sympathy with the struggling mass which helps itself through the difficulties of life, and she did not altogether appreciate Trelawny's sentiments.

'One man's money is to me the same as another's,' she said. 'I should respect this Delannoy were he the architect of his own fortune, but he only spends, in the most offensive, vulgar way, the gold his father gathered together by the sweat of his brow and the labour of his hands. A man who begins life at a common forge, and accumulates a fortune such as he possessed, is a being to respect, Cis Trelawny.'

'Why, these sentiments have a very democratic ring about them, my dear madame. I should have thought you were too fond of the luxuries of life, and revelled too much in the warmth of its brightest side, to enter into the feelings of the strugglers.'

'The queen of the Bohemians can be no aristocrat,' she answered, tartly. 'What are her subjects, from one end of her kingdom to the other, but a crowd of workers?'

'"*La liberté est la richesse des peuples*,"' answered Trelawny. 'The great world inside the sacred pale, "society, that china without flaw," with its decorum, its etiquette, its formalism, is as envious of the anomalous mob outside as they, in their turn, are of its mysterious exclusiveness. The charm of the true Bohemian is his total freedom from all care—his jolly rowdy life of happy poverty. You surely do not call the cotton-spinning, gold-winning generation in which England abounds, your subjects, my beauteous queen!'

'They were once members of the great Bohemian family,' she replied. 'They have thrown off our life of freedom, and in assuming the title of *nouveaux riches*, elect to pass through an ordeal of snubbing, in order that they may finally be received in the circles of the aristocracy.'

'*Ergo*, snobs, let us give them a chapter to themselves. The great world and the small world alike discard them, but they will stray into both kingdoms, unfortunately for their subjects.'

And he laughed gaily at having settled the question to his own satisfaction. But his whole countenance changed in a moment. 'Good heavens ! what is the matter ?' he cried.

Mathilde had sprung from her seat ; the happiness was all gone out of her face, and had given place to a startled look of fear. He followed the direction of her eyes. Standing just inside the door, white as a spectre, he saw—Clive, who had entered unannounced. The wild, haggard look of his face, the feverish brightness of his eyes, gave them both the same impression. All the jealousy in his nature, they thought, had been aroused by witnessing this pleasant little *tête-à-tête*. They both remembered full well how, in the old Spa days, as far as Mathilde d'Aubigné was concerned, Clive and Trelawny had been mortal foes. Cis, however, did not frequently allow himself to be taken at a disadvantage, and he was speedily master of the situation.

'My good fellow,' he said, 'we were just talking of you. Roll your weary-looking limbs into that large chair, and let us discuss last night's experiences confidentially.'

'Curse last night !—I wish it had been blotted out of time !' was the muttered answer, as Clive threw himself into the proffered chair.

'Oswald, what is the matter?—what has happened?' asked Mathilde, as she stood over him.

'It is all your work,' he said, pushing her violently away from him. 'I should have been a different man but for you ; and all this would never have taken place ! Oh ! will nothing end this life of misery?' And, leaning his elbows on his knees, he buried his head in his hands, and sobbed like a child.

'A case for brandy and soda,' said Trelawny, not knowing quite whether to laugh or take the thing seriously.

Mathilde seemed transfixed. She scarcely knew what to do. Clive, in his dark moods, was dangerous to meddle with ; and she did not care to court a second repulse in Trelawny's presence.

'Speak to him, Cis,' she whispered at last. 'Ask him what it all means?'

A light seemed to have dawned on Trelawny, for he put his hand soothingly on Clive's shoulder, while he addressed him in those full low tones Cis Trelawny vouchsafed but seldom to use, save to the woman he would fain bewitch.

‘Don’t grieve, my dear Clive. She is surely scarcely worthy to raise all this tempest in a strong man’s heart!’

Clive looked up.

‘You know it, then, already? It is another vile plot into which I have been dragged! Madame d’Aubigné, why was I made to come here last night?’

‘What does all this mean? Cis, Oswald, explain one of you. I am totally at a loss to comprehend.’

The one word ‘Georgie’ fell from Clive’s lips, and he leant his head against the sofa cushion, as though he refused to converse any more on the subject.

‘She has gone off with Sir Henry Wilbraham,’ said Trelawny, in explanation.

‘When?—How do you know?—Why did you not tell me?’ asked Mathilde, excitedly.

‘By Jove! I did not know it would interest you so much! I went to the Waterloo Station this morning, to express my opinion about a haunch of venison my uncle had sent me, and which had never put in an appearance, and there I saw the happy pair just starting on their journey into the country.’

‘Then it is quite true. Oh! Georgie, Georgie! And I thought her so innocent and so pure!’ muttered Clive to himself.

‘Come, old fellow, rouse yourself, and don’t let the black demon take entire possession of you,’ said Trelawny, in his tender, womanish way. ‘It is not very complimentary, either, to our beautiful queen here, that you should come into her drawing-room and sob your heart out over the faithlessness of another woman.’

‘Mathilde will forgive me!’ and Clive put his hand out in a weak, rambling sort of way.

But Mathilde turned away from him, her rich beauty heightened by the look of excited anger which her face had assumed. It was not that she was exactly angry with Oswald Clive, but she was intensely annoyed that Trelawny should be a witness of this scene. Her heart yearned in love for Clive, and she felt a secret joy over his wife’s defection; but she suppressed all show of feeling, and looked grand and dignified, as she said sneeringly, ‘I have nothing to forgive, Mr. Clive. All the friendship which ever existed between us was at an end when you married Georgie Trant. Let by-gones be by-gones now.’

Clive looked at her absently—like a man in a dream.

‘Are you going to desert me too? Oh, Mathilde, what has happened to cause this change?’

‘Nothing, save that I do not choose to be taken up, now that you have discovered that I spoke the truth when I told you that your wife had a lover in Sir Henry Wilbraham.’

‘That is right, Madame d’Aubigné, don’t accept any man at second-hand,’ said Trelawny, rising to take his leave. He was too well versed in heart-histories not to be quite aware that there was more feeling existing between these two than Mathilde wished him to perceive. Like most men of his stamp, Cis Trelawny was a pauper, and Madame d’Aubigné’s pleasant little establishment, now that she had become wealthy, was exactly the house of resort he delighted in, and he had no wish to offend its fair mistress by intrusively boring her with his society. His highly-cultivated instincts suggested that both she and Clive were wishing him anywhere but in that room just then, so he wisely prepared to beat a retreat.

‘Whatever you do, don’t fight,’ he said to Clive, patting him on the back as he passed him; ‘it spoils one’s beauty, unfits one for future conquests, and is altogether an infernal nuisance. The Divorce Court is a far more telling invention of Old Nick’s. It rids you of a troublesome appendage, forces her into an anomalous position, and makes your rival burden himself with her, or be cried shame on in all the clubs. Thus you punish the offenders without victimising yourself.’

Clive did not answer him, but sat passively there without speaking, his head buried in the sofa cushion.

For some time after Trelawny’s departure there was a deep silence. The clock ticked monotonously on the mantelpiece, the bird twittered in its cage, the little Maltese dog scratched with its forepaws against Mathilde’s dress and whined to be taken up; but she lay back almost motionless in her armchair by the fire, and watched Oswald crouching on the sofa. At last she rose, and walking across the room sat down beside him, and sought to turn his face towards her.

‘Dear Oswald,’ she said, ‘be comforted. Why should you weep and fret—am I not still here?’

He turned and looked at her, and his eyes were so wild,

his face so haggard and seamed with agony, that Mathilde fairly quailed before him. 'Oh, Oswald, did you love Georgie so very dearly?' she asked him in piteous tones.

He let his head drop heavily on his shoulder, but did not speak at once; then he said, quietly—

'I thought she cared for me; but she has preferred that sanctimonious beast all along. We had our little tiffs, too frequently, alas! but I never thought Georgie would have left me thus. Oh! Mathilde, it is a bitter trial, in one moment to find oneself robbed of the only thing in life which you believed really loved you.'

Madame d'Aubigné was pale and cold as marble now. The heart-cry which is heard so seldom in a lifetime, and which Trelawny so gladly would have raised, now burst out with all its anguish.

'Not loved!—oh! Oswald. What have your sufferings been to mine? Shall I ever forget that wretched morning when the announcement of your marriage fell as a death-stroke on my senses! I bade adieu to my daintiest dream; for I was no longer the loved one, the first and guiding power of your existence.'

'Good Heavens! Mathilde, is this true? If you have really loved me thus, what a worthless beast I have been! But why did you laugh and chaff and sneer, as though your heart were incapable of fostering a warm feeling? I thought your love for me was but as the tempest of the passing hour. I have often condemned you for the frigidity of your nature. If occasionally, for a brief space, you did seem to warm, you invariably relapsed into the old coldness.'

'Life has its chances, *povero*, and they will guide us, notwithstanding our heart's longings. I could never have been false to you—you were interwoven with my life. I had imagined too fondly that, come weal or woe—come absence, come danger, you would never have proved untrue to me. I was mistaken, that is all. The first chit that pleased you bound your wavering nature in her roseate chains.'

'Oh! Mathilde, why did you not speak plainly before?—why did you seek to deceive me? How much misery and sorrow you might have saved us both!'

'Pardon me, Mr. Clive,' said Mathilde, who was recovering her usual spirits, 'it strikes me you have had by far the worst of the bargain, and I am very much inclined to think that it serves you quite right.'

'I will never doubt you any more. At your feet let me swear the allegiance of my life.'

'Nonsense, don't be melo-dramatic. Be a little bit practical, if you can, and make me understand what has really taken place.'

Head, as usual, was asserting its dominion. Mathilde loved Oswald Clive better than any other thing in life, but even now that he was sitting by her side, her own, her very own, for the time, at least, it was not in her to give herself up to the happiness of the hour. Her busy brain must plot and arrange, and map out plans for the future.

That Georgie was gone, was all Clive seemed to know; that she had gone to Sir Henry Wilbraham he had guessed, and Trelawny's words had confirmed his belief. He had made no effort to trace her. Inactivity had ever been, more or less, one of Clive's weaknesses, and, since he had known Mathilde and leant on her clearer judgment for instruction and guidance, the fault had not lessened. He had left Lady Ida in a state bordering on frenzy, and had come off at once to Mathilde. She would tell him what was best to be done.

Little had he anticipated the reception she gave him. Sneers, quips, and derision, he had expected; but that she would greet him with such an outburst of warm feeling, he was far from imagining. Thus the whole current of his thoughts was changed, and, from the depths of despair over Georgie's defection, he was raised to a pinnacle of mad delight as he thought that Mathilde really loved him. Life with Georgie had not been as sweet as it might have been; now he would live only to please Mathilde, who had proved so reliable and strong in the past, and seemed ready to be so loving and tender in the present.

'The fact then is that you know nothing whatever about your wife, save that you had a tempestuous argument with her, on my account, when you returned home in the small hours this morning? Really, Oswald, I should have given you credit for being a better diplomat. Georgie is evidently too much for you, *povero*.'

'In future let me devote myself to you, since she is faithless.'

'Not so fast, *mon cher*, I am not quite prepared to credit all this tale. Sir Henry Wilbraham is scarcely likely to

forfeit his cognomen of saint, and the high place he holds in the world's esteem, for the sake of this foolish little Georgie.'

'Why, Mathilde, you suggested to me weeks ago that there was love-making going on between them.'

'Of course I did. That Sir Henry was in love with your wife long before you married her I know, and that he still retains a tenderness for her I have every reason to suspect. But he is not hot-headed and impetuous like you, *caro*; he would not be guilty of a foolish or an imprudent action, and is about the last man who would care to figure in the newspapers as a co-respondent. Take my word for it, the whole business will be veneered over with at least the appearance of decorum.'

'What then do you suggest for me to do?'

'Go after your wife and bring her back, if you are not tired of having your free-will made subservient to her babyish waywardness. If you are a man and can hold your own, demand a maintenance from Lady Ida, and consent to let Madame Georgie coquette through the world after her own foolish fashion. For my part, I should recommend the latter arrangement.'

'Georgie will probably tire of her fit of anger, and may want to come back to me. I cannot believe but that she loves me, after all,' said Oswald.

The full red lips parted disdainfully, and Mathilde drew her *svelte* form to its height.

'Your vacillation is past all endurance!' she said sneeringly; 'you have not as much character as Fido there; why, even he knows what and whom he likes best in life, which is more than you do. We do not understand such weakness of purpose here, do we, Fido?' She stooped and took the dog up in her arms, and stood on the hearthrug caressing him. 'When once we love it is for ever; you will not leave your first love to obey the whims of my Lady Caprice, eh, *caro*?'

'Mathilde, this is too bad!—say what I am to do?'

'You know your own feelings about this business better than I can possibly do,' she answered, as she tossed the dog on to the floor, then clapped her hands and threw a ball to make him bark and play.

'For Heaven's sake, leave that beast of a dog alone, or

I will break his cursed neck, and tell me at once what you would have me do !'

'Poor Fido, was he unkind ?' and she went on playing with the dog while she answered him, carelessly, 'Get as much money as you can from these people, and begin life once more on your own account. Behind the chair—that is right, Fido, over you go—I think I shall go to Paris, Cis Trelawny is so energetic about its superiority over London. They seem to understand the art of living better in France—Fido, you are a beauty !'

'Mathilde, are you determined to drive me mad?—looking at you now, who would believe that not half an hour ago you professed to love me devotedly.'

'So I do, my poor Oswald ; only as you choose to divide your affection for me with Georgie, I thought I might as well lavish some of mine on Fido.'

'If you go to Paris we shall never meet, for I dare not show my face there,' said Oswald, sulkily.

'Bah ! the Baron de Villemar knows better than to interfere with any friend of mine. I am tolerably well versed in his past history. No, the old times of play and excitement are not gone yet, *mon* Oswald.'

And so, as in the old Eden days, Clive was led to his own destruction. The ford which Georgie, in her thoughtless folly, had placed between herself and her husband, Mathilde was using her best endeavours to render impassable. A few words of explanation and regret over the past might have brought Georgie back once more to his side ; but Mathilde was resolved that, if she could prevent it, they should never be spoken. When she heard of the marriage, now some months ago, had she not sworn in her rage that she would sow dissension at his hearth?—and she had not failed to keep her word. Woe to Oswald's weak vacillating nature, in the hands of this wily, intriguing woman !





CHAPTER XXX.

PLAY.

THE first night of the Opera season. The house is crowded with the beauty and fashion of the metropolis. Mathilde d'Aubigné, her rich full beauty enhanced by the black dress she wears out of pretended respect for her departed husband, is by no means the least lovely woman in that bright scene of fashion. Many are the glasses turned on her box, and not a few inquire of their friends who the new beauty is on whom London is now allowed to gaze for the first time. Cis Trelawny is the cavalier in attendance, but Mathilde's masculine acquaintance is no small one; and now that she has chosen to appear once more in public, and in the position, too, of a wealthy widow, many are the would-be adorers who flit around her, and not a few have entered to pay their respects in her box to-night. The opera was *Faust*, and the third act was already nearly at an end, when Mathilde snatched the glass from her companion; but it was not to the stage she directed her attention—her gaze seemed to be rivetted on some one in the stalls.

'It is Sir Henry Wilbraham,' she said, as she returned the glass to Trelawny. 'I thought he would not be such a fool as to run off with Mrs. Clive.'

'By Jove, so it is! I wonder what he did with her?—for that they went away in a train together from the Waterloo Station this very day, I can swear.'

'He has his guardian angel with him too—that Captain Earlsfort. *Tiens!* how I hate that man!'

Cis Trelawny laughed.

'A nice sort of fellow Earlsfort is, to be called a guardian angel to anyone! There is not much of the odour of sanctity about him.'

‘Well, he always follows Sir Henry like a shadow, and seems to be desirous of shielding him from every danger.’

‘He has some personal motive— of that you may be very sure. Earlsfort is too much of the man-of-the-world to give his services for nothing. He is hard-up, probably, and Sir Henry is well off.’

‘Are you judging him according to your own standard, my dear Cis? or do you know anything of his private affairs?’

‘I know he has some bits of paper floating about; and a man does not put himself into the hands of the Jews till he is compelled, my dear madame.’

‘Make your story complete, and say these bills are backed by Sir Henry,’ suggested Mathilde, smiling.

‘No, no, no, that won’t do—Wilbraham is not the sort of man to put his hand to a bill.’

‘Yet you gave him credit for running off with another man’s wife! There are nice points in your code of morality, Mr. Trelawny.’

‘There is no saying what a man may do when under the influence of strong infatuation,’ he answered. ‘You women but seldom know your own power; but matters connected with one’s banker’s-book are looked on from a very different aspect. Wilbraham is pretty wary over his cash, I should imagine. They have recognised you; see, they are both looking up here.’

The curtain had now fallen, and in the course of two or three minutes Sir Henry Wilbraham, accompanied by Dick Earlsfort, entered Madame d’Aubigné’s box.

She received Sir Henry in her most cordial manner, with one of her sweetest smiles, but to Captain Earlsfort she was frigidity itself. Madame d’Aubigné was not likely easily to forget how utterly unsuccessful she had been in her attempt to bewitch him during their brief acquaintance at Brinck Hall; nor did she fail to remember how she had believed that it was to his influence she owed the change Sir Henry’s sentiments had undergone towards herself. She hated him accordingly, and awaited but an opportunity to pay him off for old scores. Earlsfort was nothing daunted by his reception—it only served to amuse him; he thought himself a match for any woman, even though that woman were Mathilde d’Aubigné.

‘I congratulate Madame d’Aubigné on being restored to her true position,’ he said, in his careless off-hand way. ‘I

never thought the humble companion was the part the gods intended her to play.'

Mathilde made him no answer, but turned to Sir Henry, and spoke in those low tones her foreign accent made so very taking.

'Dear Sir Henry, I am so glad to see you again. Lady Wilbraham, and my sweet pet Glory, how are they both?'

Earlsfort's forehead contracted and his eyebrows arched fiercely. It irritated him beyond measure to hear Glory's name on this woman's lips. Cis Trelawny had taken advantage of their entrance to go off on a little cruise, and Earlsfort seated himself in the chair he had just vacated, as he said, rather testily, before Sir Henry could answer,

'That time at Brinck Hall having been a mistake, don't you think it would be better for us all to enter into a compact never to refer to it again? The knowledge that Madame d'Aubigné condescended to an *alias* would not raise her in the opinion of her acquaintance generally—at least, I should imagine not. Of course I am speaking with her interest at heart.'

'Indeed! I am delighted to find that you are so *empresé* in my service, Captain Earlsfort, though the covert sneer does not escape me. Sir Henry, I feel, does not judge me as severely as you do; he can appreciate my motives, which were none other than to gain an honest livelihood. A woman surrounded by poverty and misunderstanding, as I was then, finds it always a hard matter to overcome difficulties.'

'Earlsfort did not mean anything offensive, I feel certain,' said Sir Henry, hurriedly. 'We both came up here to have the very great pleasure of seeing you again. He is as anxious as I am myself that our future relations may be amicable. Are you not, Dick?'

Thus appealed to, Earlsfort bowed, but did not speak, and there was an amused look in his eyes which was anything but pleasing or re-assuring to Mathilde. However, she thought it wisest to accept peace, for the time at least, so she smiled, and showed her white teeth, and, with her woman's tact, changed the subject into a flow of easy talk on the current topics of the day. For a few minutes all went smoothly, save that Earlsfort would occasionally drop some little sarcasm which rankled in Mathilde's mind, though she pretended not to notice it. At last, however, curiosity, or the love of mis-

chief, which is innate in most women, got the better of her, and she began to sail once more in troubled waters.

‘That pretty Mrs. Clive, whose marriage took place a few months back—have you seen her lately, Sir Henry?’

Wilbraham turned very white, and shook all over. Earlsfort saw a pretty face in the box opposite, for he began to use his glasses vigorously. This little comedy should play itself out—he was resolved he would not nip it in the bud by answering for his friend.

‘She is staying with my mother in the country,’ said Sir Henry, trying to steady his voice, in which emotion was but too apparent.

‘Indeed! And her husband?’

Earlsfort dropped his glasses, and turning round, confronted Mathilde with a look. She did not blench or move, but quietly waited for Sir Henry to answer her question.

‘He is in town, I believe,’ he said shortly.

‘Quarrelled, I suppose? Those desperate love-matches generally end in war.’

‘Clive is an old friend of yours, is he not?’ asked Sir Henry.

‘I know him—yes—have known him for some years. He dined with me last night. I had hoped to have seen his wife, but I understood she was not well. He did not say she had gone to Brinck Hall.’

Earlsfort and Sir Henry exchanged glances.

‘There is some mystery,’ she said. ‘Tell me what is it? I love mysteries—they are such good antidotes to *ennui*.’

‘Do you mean to say you do not know on whose account there has been this quarrel between Clive and his wife?’

‘Then there is a quarrel? *Dieu!* how should I know anything about it? Is it about yourself, Sir Henry? One or two bits of gossip have reached me on that subject.’

‘By Jove! Madame d’Aubigné, you deserve a medal for coolness, if such a thing were ever struck,’ said Earlsfort, as he laughed heartily.

Mathilde looked at him, and there was almost murder in her eye.

‘Have you come here to insult me, Captain Earlsfort?’

‘Come, come,’ he answered, still laughing, ‘don’t let your angry passions rise, “*le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*,” but, upon my soul, you must take us for a brace of the veriest fools

on earth if you think we are taken in by that look of utter innocence. We are familiar with all the details of your flirtation, and I should say it is another subject, which would be better avoided, Madame d'Aubigné. What a lot of quicksands there are knocking about, to be sure !

'Is it my fault that Mr. Clive chooses to give way to the folly of caring for me?' said Mathilde, looking down. 'We poor women are always the victims when you men descend to a weakness. Sir Henry, you do not blame me?' and the large eyes made full play upon him. 'How miserable it is to be suspected and annoyed like this ! However, I am going to Paris next week, and I shall get away from all this intriguing. I hope my own country-people will be kinder to me than you English have been.' And the tears glistened like dew-drops in the corners of her eyes.

Sir Henry was touched.

'Believe me,' he said, as he hung over her chair, 'I have faith in you still. You cannot show your wisdom or truth more strongly than by absenting yourself for a time. It is what I would have asked of you. I trust that these wretched differences may ere long be made up, and that we shall all eventually be on good and friendly terms with each other.'

Just the faintest smile played at the corners of Mathilde's lips at these words, but the re-entrance of Cis Trelawny put a stop to the conversation, and the two friends departed.

'Hal Wilbraham, you are a fool, and that woman is a match for the devil himself !' was Earlsfort's remark, as he closed the door of the box after him. 'Since you would insist on paying her a visit to-night, it was well that I accompanied you.'

'Well, too,' replied Sir Henry, 'that she saw me here. Evil rumours had reached her, you see.'

'She will hatch some confounded plot out of it, whatever happens,' muttered Dick, as they regained their stalls just as the curtain went up on the fourth act.

'Well, have you unriddled the mystery? I thought I would leave you to the unfettered enjoyment of your woman's ingenuity,' said Trelawny, as he seated himself by Mathilde's side.

'Just as I supposed,' answered Mathilde, while her whole countenance flashed—'that little fair beast has gone down to stay with Lady Wilbraham, and I am accused of being the sole cause of the quarrel.'

‘By Jove! but that is charming! Earlsfort invented that story, I make no doubt. He has the greatest facility in the art of weaving an entanglement.’

There was no love existing between these two men. Dick Earlsfort rather snubbed and rode rough-shod over Cis Trelawny—called him *Le Bijou*, and despised him for his womanish, finical ways, though perhaps he envied him just a little that beauty of face and form for which he was so renowned.

‘Oh! he is not wanting in brains,’ said Mathilde; ‘but he is not the only person in the world who is thus gifted, I presume. What a fool that heavy baronet is, to be sure! Why, Captain Earlsfort can twist him round his little finger. Not back a bill for him!—why, he would do anything he told him.’

‘Ah! well, he did not do that, for I was in at Dickson’s, the money-lender’s, a few days ago, and I heard all about it. A friend of mine, a man called Ffoulkes, has been ass enough to give his name. The bill is due one day soon. Earlsfort wants it renewed, and Ffoulkes wants to get rid of the responsibility. I don’t know how they will settle it.’

‘You young Englishmen seem to live on bills.’

‘Not quite that. A poor wretch who gets into the hands of the money-lenders is not to be envied; they are a cursed race!’

‘And you, Cis—are you free from their shackles?’

‘For the present, thank goodness, I am!—but if we go on playing as we did last night, there is no saying how soon I may become involved.’

‘When you are in difficulties, come to me. I am no usurer, and will help you to the best of my power.’

‘Ah! Madame, how good you are! I am unworthy of so much solicitude.’

‘Nonsense!—you don’t mean a word you say—you think yourself all-captivating. But I am interested about Captain Earlsfort. Tell me, are they for large sums, these bits of paper of his?’

‘That particular one is for 500*l*. I do not know anything about the others. But if you hate the man, why do you ask so much about him?’

‘Womanly curiosity, that is all. You are coming to supper at my house to-night, Cis?’

‘ Could I deny myself that pleasure ? ’

The opera being ended, the miniature brougham conducted Mathilde d’Aubigné to the house in Mayfair, where a charming little supper awaited her numerous guests, in which Jerome, as *maitre-d’hôtel*, had surpassed himself. Presently three or four stragglers dropped in from the different places of amusement in the metropolis, and at last Mr. Clive made his appearance. The haggard look his face had worn in the morning was still there, and his eyes were bloodshot, and had sunk deep into his head. Mathilde made room for him beside her as she pressed his hand re-assuringly.

As the wine passed round with no measured hand, the party was not a tranquil one, and many a racy story was circulated, many a *bon-mot* was received with unanimous applause. Clive alone was silent—a sort of stupor seemed to hang over him. He looked as though the events of his life had been too much for him, and he was worn out by the perpetual recurrence of some exciting episode. Vainly did Mathilde seek to recall him to himself ; neither her brightest sallies, as she joined in the general mirth, nor her whispered words of tenderness, as she dropped her voice into its softest tones, had the slightest effect on him. He seemed as though he heard her not, and looked scared and lost to all outer influence, as a man might who had had midnight meetings with some spirit from the unseen world of terror. His inert lifeless look at last attracted Trelawny’s attention, and he began to quote *Manfred*, a sneer on his handsome face the while—

‘ There is an order

Of mortals on the earth, who do become
Old in their youth, and die ere middle age,
Without the violence of warlike death ;
Some perishing of pleasure—some of study,
Some worn with toil—some of mere weariness,
Some of disease, and some insanity,
And some of withered, or of broken hearts.’

Confess what has happened to you, man, that you sit there like the spectre in *Don Giovanni*, as though you would fain strike terror into every heart ? ’

‘ What a tease you are ! ’ said Mathilde, putting out her hand deprecatingly to Trelawny.

‘ My good fellow, if the poetical muse have lighted on you, pray let us have something a little more lively,’ sug-

gested one of the party. 'Incarnate misery being represented by Clive, suppose you personate its antithesis. It is far more in your line.'

'*Un chanson de Béranger*,' cried a chorus of voices. 'Come, Trelawny, trill out some luscious verse in that big full voice of yours.'

'C'est à table quand je m'envivre
De gaité, de vin, et d'amour,'

he began, among rounds of applause, which had risen into a deafening storm by the time he had finished the song.

Madame d'Aubigné at last led the way upstairs; and while she and the two or three ladies of the party talked pretty platitudes by the open window, the actual business of the night began. Brag on the one hand, lansquenet on the other, held their onward course, till the ladies too followed in the wake of the men's excitement.

'There's nothing gives a man such spirit,
Leavening his blood, as cayenne doth a curry.'

Mr. Clive played to win, and the re-action from the state of despair in which he had dwelt for the last few hours, nearly turned his brain. Delannoy, as on the previous evening, was the loser, though there was one l'anchon, a young Frenchman, who had gone some heavy sums to the bad, and groaned in spirit accordingly.

'Lose your money to him, Cis. I will be banker,' whispered Mathilde, as she passed Trelawny. 'If he go back to Paris out of humour, we may be attacked for unfair play.'

Their excitement continued with unremitting fever, varying in its moods according to the capricious chances of luck, till the early cock had long 'done salutation to the morn,' and at last they were all gone save Clive, who loitered by Mathilde's side.

'I cannot talk any more. I am tired from all this whirl. You must come to-morrow.'

'Have you heard aught of Georgie?' he asked.

'She is at Brinck Hall, safely domiciled in the enemy's fortress. Be firm to your point, and make an arrangement with Lady Ida to your own advantage. Come here in the afternoon, and tell me the result of your interview with her. Now go, for my head aches; I will talk no more. Cis,' she called out as she opened the door, for she still heard voices

in the hall, 'take Mr. Clive with you, do, and put him up against Lady Ida's door; he is not fit to be trusted alone. *Au revoir, mon Oswald.* Take your dismissal in good part. We have both had our *quota* of excitement for to-night.'

And she came back, and stood looking at herself in the large mirror, as she leant her two arms gracefully on the console-table the while. The picture reflected back was no pleasing one, for all the beauty seemed to have gone out of Mathilde's face. It was not only a faded, jaded look of fatigue which her features wore, but in a moment a cold stony glare seemed to have replaced the laughing, dimpled expression which had gladdened them during that long evening of pleasure. Much had passed during the last twenty-four hours—much that required mature thought; and Mathilde's active brain was making its plans. Amongst all the Free Lances who had just left her house, impressed by the power of her beauty and the intoxicating charm of her manners, not one but would have felt, could he have seen her now, that he would rather kneel in the dust to retain her friendship than do aught that would bring him under the ban of her displeasure.





CHAPTER XXXI.

A DRAMATIC DAY.

IT is scarcely noon, yet the miniature brougham is standing at Madame d'Aubigné's door! In a few minutes she comes down, beautiful as ever. Stimulants, cosmetiques, art, have been called in to assist nature, for neither beauty nor health is proof against the deep draughts of perpetual excitement in which Mathilde has of late indulged. The carriage puts her down at the corner of Vigo Street and Regent Street, and Mathilde starts off alone, reading carefully the names inscribed on the different plates on the doors, as she saunters slowly on. At last she finds the house of which she is in search, and walking up to the first-floor, she rings a bell. It is at once answered by a little wizen man, with a pen behind his ear.

'I wish to see Mr. Dickson, on particular business.'

She is kept waiting for a few seconds in an outer office, and then ushered mysteriously into the presence of the great money-lender. He is a portly, good-tempered looking man, with bland, urbane manners. He smiles benignly on Mathilde as he offers her a seat. Ladies are not frequently Mr. Dickson's clients, but when they do come to visit him they are always received with an immense amount of courtesy.

'In what can I assist you, my dear madame? Anything in my small way with the greatest of pleasure.'

'You hold a bill of Captain Earlsfort's, I think, for 500*l*.?'

The money-lender ran his eye quickly through a notebook which lay on the table before him.

'Just so—Richard Earlsfort—due 12th of March—next week, in fact. He wants it renewed.'

'What will you take for it?—down?'

Mr. Dickson looked at his visitor with an amused twinkle in his eye. His profession gave him some little insight into the varied phases of human life ; and it was not the first time a great lady—for such he imagined Mathilde to be—had come draped in black, as she was now, to liquidate the liabilities of some favoured lover. Dick Earlsfort was in luck, thought the money-lender, who rather liked Dick for that off-hand, genial manner of his. Poor Dick ! he would rather have doubled his debt than willingly have allowed this wretched bit of paper to pass into the hands of Madame d'Aubigné.

'What will I take ? Why, the bill is for 500*l.* is it not ? There can be no question of what is to be taken.'

'Nonsense !' said Mathilde. 'I don't suppose that you gave more than 300*l.* for it ; you had better take 400*l.* and give it up to me. You know the old English proverb—"A bird in the hand," &c.'

Mr. Dickson looked surprised ; he had mistaken his customer. The great ladies, when they came, always gave him his price—in fact, they would give him double—anything—to exonerate the beloved one from his difficulties ; but this woman seemed shrewd, and had some little understanding about the market value of things. She was evidently not unaccustomed to traffic in money.

'Four hundred pounds !' he said. 'I would sacrifice a good deal to please a lady, but this is asking too much. Money is so very tight, too, just now ; it is with difficulty we poor beggars can get along at all.'

'So much the more reason that you should accept my offer. Think of the months, years, you may have to wait before you can realize a farthing of that money. You know, as well as I do, that bit of paper is not worth any more.'

'Pray may I ask why you are so anxious to have it ?'

'That is my affair, Mr. Dickson.'

'I cannot do it—upon my word, I can't,' he muttered, half to himself.

Mathilde rose.

'Then, as we are not likely to come to terms, I will wish you good morning,' she said.

'My dear lady, you are too hard, indeed you are. Throw in another 50*l.*, and you shall have the bill.'

What a sharp fellow you are !' said Mathilde, laughing.

‘I would not be in your hands for something. Well, I suppose I must give it you ; here are the notes.’

In a few minutes the transaction was complete, and Mathilde, with Captain Earlsfort’s bill in her pocket, was once more seated in her little brougham. She next drove to Marshal and Snelgrove’s, then about Regent Street shopping. She looked so complacent and smiling the while, no one would have guessed that a bitter feeling of revenge lay coiled at her heart, and had prompted the diabolical scheme of which Dick Earlsfort was the victim. Lastly she went to Ludlow’s, in Bond Street. A gentleman advanced to open the carriage-door ; for Mathilde, true Bohemian as she was, was in the habit of letting herself out and in. It was Sir Henry Wilbraham, accompanied by his shadow, Captain Earlsfort. Madame d’Aubigné did not flinch, but smiled her very sweetest on poor Dick ; she could afford to be gracious, now that she had the means of vengeance within reach. Her purchases being completed, she returns home. Jerome is looking over the blind in the dining-room with a very anxious, perturbed expression on his weatherbeaten countenance.

‘*Oh, madame, quel malheur ! Dieu !* what shall we do ?’ he exclaims, as he opens the door to his mistress.

‘Well, what is the matter now, *mon vieux* ? Has the *patissier* failed in punctuality, or the *pourvoyeur* sent no fish, and, like Vatel, are you going to expiate their fault with your life ?’

‘*Non, madame, it is* no subject for *la plaisanterie*. Mr. Sternheim is gone !’

‘Gone ! good Heavens, Jerome, what do you mean ? Not dead, I hope—or we shall have an inquiry into the cause, which will bring down far too much observation on us. *Tiens !* what a fool I was to burden myself with that old man.’

‘*Il est parti, madame, je vous le dis.* Not dead ; no, no—gone from this door in a cab.’

‘So much the better. I was rather perplexed to know what to do with him, especially as his presence here has scarcely produced the pleasing impression I expected ; besides, I am thinking of going to Paris for a little while, and I could not have left him here alone. Yet I don’t quite understand how he went—why, he has neither the sense nor the power to go off anywhere by himself.’

'*C'est ça, c'est ça !*' said Jerome, getting excited ; 'now you are coming to the trouble. He did not go of his own will ; two men came for him.'

'And these two men were ——'

'Mr. Dillon and a stranger.'

'Why did you not ask them to wait till I had returned ?'

'*Au contraire.* I said madame was in the country—would not be back till very late—perhaps not till to-morrow.'

'My good Jerome, what does all this mean ?—have you taken leave of your senses ?'

'*Du tout, du tout, chère madame.*' And Jerome looked round cautiously, as though he thought the old saying about the walls having ears were really true. 'The stranger was *le vieux Baird*.'

Mathilde paled visibly, even through the *souçon* of rouge she had taken to of late.

'He has come at last, then,' she said slowly ; 'the removal of Mr. Sternheim, too, means mischief. I suppose he thought we were going to poison him ;' and her lips curled disdainfully. Then she began to laugh as her eye fell on Jerome's woe-begone countenance, and she patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. '*N'ayez pas peur, mon brave.* I am in no danger ; you were quite right to gain a little time, though. Now give me some luncheon, for I am famishing, and then we will arrange our plans. *Vive la France !* we will not be outwitted by this Yankee—eh ?'

'It is good that madame can view things in so cheerful a spirit,' said the old servant, as, his knees knocking together, and his hands trembling with fright, he obeyed her and brought the repast she had ordered.

Mathilde partook of it in silence, her thoughts far distant the while. She had no fear for herself in this matter. What could Ralph's father do to her, beyond subjecting her to an impertinent cross-examination, which she felt herself quite equal to undergo. 'A little manœuvring will always enable a woman to slope neatly out of an unpleasant business,' was Mathilde's creed.

As yet it had been a true one, but the day might come when she would carry audacity too far, and entangle herself in an inextricable mesh. No, it was for another that Mathilde trembled—it was on Clive's account that her countenance wore that thoughtful look of care—for him that she

was planning and plotting in that busy, evil-begetting brain of hers.

‘Mr. Clive—he is passing the window; show him in here, Jerome, and then guard the door. Tell anyone who may call I am in the country; have a *migraine*—any lie you please; but let in no visitors—not even Mr. Trelawny, till I give you leave.’

In another moment Clive was in the room.

‘Well, Oswald, you look somewhat brisker this morning; come and have some lunch. That Château d’Yquem is of the best. Fanchon, whose father is the chief grape-grower, sent it to me as a present.’

To what perfection had Mathilde carried the art of dissimulation! There was not a shadow on her brow, or a care in her large, full eye as she welcomed Oswald Clive; and yet few would willingly have suffered the cold, sick feeling which lay like an incubus at her heart.

He drank the luscious wine, and warmed under its benign influence.

‘Well, how have you been getting on?’ asked Matilde after awhile. ‘Have you heard aught of your wife?’

‘You were right; she is at Brinck Hall; but Wilbraham is in town; he had a long interview with Lady Ida this morning.’

‘And they wish you to go and join them, and play number three to their love-making under the green bushes down in the country, I presume?’ sneered Mathilde.

‘On the contrary, both Lady Ida and Sir Henry seem to agree that a few months of absence would cure that wayward little wife of mine of her folly, and they rather recommend that I should go and travel for a time. Business might have called me abroad, thus the world would take no offence at our separation.’

‘And they are to provide the money?’

‘Yes, with one proviso.’

‘Go on—don’t mind me—I am beginning to understand.’

‘You are right. It is that I give up my friendship for yourself.’

Mathilde laughed heartily.

‘You have decidedly got the worst of that bargain, *amico*. Madame Georgie is to remain for the next two months at Brinck Hall, amusing herself with her saintly adorer, while

they condemn you to wander about the earth alone. Have you consented?’

‘Not yet. Poor Georgie! she is my wife, remember, and I love her dearly, but you are my best and dearest friend. It is hard to make a choice.’

‘Fate has decided the question for you,’ said Mathilde, quietly, as she rose and stood with her back to the fireplace. ‘John Baird is in London.’

‘Good heavens! then all is lost!’ said Oswald. ‘This time there is no escape. Old Baird, was it? The servant told me a tall, angular man had been inquiring for me this morning, but, as good luck would have it, I had gone out; however, it matters but little, for the worst must come now.’

‘Of course it must, unless you make an effort to avert it. If you go home and sit quietly down in Lady Ida’s drawing-room, waiting for events to disentangle themselves, you will be had up before some English law-courts in less than twenty-four hours. But I should not think even you would be such a fool.’

‘What am I to do?’

‘I have planned it all. You must go abroad at once.’

‘The old story—hunted from one end of the earth to the other like a wild beast. Oh! I cannot bear it, Mathilde—better to face the worst at once!’

‘And leave Georgie to triumph over your fall? You don’t suppose she would ever even look at you again, if you had once figured before a police-court? Recollect, too, this matter cannot be investigated without involving me as well as yourself; but perhaps that does not enter into your consideration.’

‘It does—it does! Mathilde—dear Mathilde, do with me as you will, only tell me what you wish me to do.’

‘To-night you will start for France, accompanied by old Jerome. You are not fit to be trusted alone. In the Pays du Berri, not very far from Châteauroux, there lives a certain Madame Philippeau, who was once my mother’s maid, and is devoted to me. Jerome knows her well. You will go there, assuming the character of an invalid; you look haggard and white enough for anything. Jerome will arrange for you under another name. You speak French well enough to deceive the peasants, particularly as you are ill, and cannot indulge much in conversation.’

'Oh ! Mathilde, you have planned all this for me ?—but what an existence ! How long is it to last ?'

'Not long, I hope, my poor Oswald ; anyhow, it will be better than a felon's cell.'

'And you—what are you going to do ?'

'Stay here and hoodwink the Yankee. I have some business too of my own to attend to. Never fear for me—they will not touch me as long as you are not to be found. You had charge of the boy, they cannot make me responsible ; but they would probably cite me before the court, and put me in a very unpleasant position, if you were once taken up.'

'Mathilde, how I admire and envy the mind which can calmly look danger in the face, and deliberately calculate its chances.'

'For you, what would I not venture ?' she said, in a caressing voice.

'Would to heaven that these troubles would pass !' and he sighed despondingly.

'Not so, Oswald. In sunshine and in joy you would forget me.'

'Never, Mathilde, never ! Common suffering and common danger have bound me to you with gratitude for ever.'

She only smiled an answer. Mathilde had but little faith that either weal or woe would fix for any definite time Oswald's wavering nature.

'Now, *caro*, I must elaborate the details of this plan with old Jerome. Your head is not in a fit state to enter into minutiae. Put yourself resignedly into Jerome's hands. He is sharp and shrewd, and may be trusted.'

'I shall go back to Lady Ida's. I must account in some way for my sudden departure, or they will raise a hue-and-cry about me next.'

'Go back there—as well put your head into the lion's den at once ! Write a note, dated from your club, saying that you are so depressed in spirits by recent events that you are off to Scotland by the mail train, to spend a few weeks wandering about its wilds. That will keep them quiet for a time, and give a false scent to the foe.'

'Ah, Mathilde, what a brain for plotting you have got !'

'Never mind that now. Go and write your note. Time presses.'

A few hours later Mathilde's salon was open to receive whatever friends might look in to wile away a weary hour in her society. The only difference apparent in the establishment was that the visitors were admitted by a brisk little boy in buttons, who had been of late helping old Jerome.

Evening receptions fluctuate, like many other good things in life, and guests did not flock numerously on this occasion. The noisy meeting of last night was not to be succeeded by its fellow. For a long time Mathilde and Cis Trelawny remained *en tête-à-tête*, when at last a knock was heard at the street door, and Mr. Baird was announced.

'Ah, you have come to explain matters, I hope,' she said, rising with eagerness.

She had put a little more rouge than usual on to-night, and there was just the faintest tremulo in her voice as she addressed her visitor.

'I am so charmed to receive you !' she continued. 'Ah, monsieur, you are poor Ralph's father, too, I think ; this makes your presence doubly welcome.'

The American was a tall, ungainly, disjointed-looking man, but with good regular features, and a set of even teeth white as ivory, which he showed very plainly every time he spoke. For a moment he seemed rather taken aback by this reception.

'You know my poor son, madam, therefore would I have speech with you,' he said, with just enough twang in his tone to show from whence he came, without making his intonation particularly offensive, though Trelawny coiled himself up in a chair at the further corner of the room, as though he thought the presence of this man might infect him.

'Ah, yes,' she said, looking down, 'what a pang it must have been to your paternal heart when you heard into what mischief his own folly had led him !'

The American's eyes gleamed.

'I swore an oath that I would have my revenge on his destroyer, Clive ; and I will, too,' he said, fiercely. 'I should think the Britishers must have some law that will touch him ; if they have not, I must do something myself. I have not crossed the Atlantic for nothing.'

'*Ciel !* Mr. Baird, you quite frighten me !' said Mathilde, clinging to the back of her chair, as though she were para-

lysed with fear. Tell me too, monsieur, why you so abruptly removed Mr. Sternheim from my care ?'

'Because I had my own particular reasons for thinking he would be safer out of your house. And perhaps you will have the goodness to inform me where I shall find this Clive ?'

'With his wife, at Lady Ida Trant's house, I should imagine. Why do you come to look for him here ?'

'Simply for the reason that I cannot find him there ; and I am told that he is perpetually lurking about these premises.'

'Then you have been told falsely ; and let me remind you, sir, that in England a man is not allowed to enter a lady's house and insult its mistress, as you have done me to-night. Mr. Trelawny, what are you thinking of to suffer this ?'

Trelawny, thus appealed to, thought it was time to interfere. He rolled out of his comfortable position, and lounged carelessly up to the disagreeable visitor.

'Take your infernal long limbs out of here,' he said, in his womanish voice ; 'or you will have the police on your track in next to no time. You can't come the bowie-knife dodge in this country ; you are in England, recollect.'

'Then I am to lose my son, see my wife fading from grief before my eyes, and find my friend in a state of imbecility—all produced by this man's scoundrelism, and sit quietly down in an arm-chair and smoke a pipe ! That is what you Britishers would do, I presume ?'

'Devil a bit !' answered Trelawny ; 'we should take out a summons against this fellow—that is to say, if we could catch him, and then leave the matter in the magistrate's hands to be sifted.'

'No doubt, if you could catch him.'

'Excuse me, but with all your national 'cuteness, you could not take the law in your own hands till you had caught him,' answered Trelawny, laughing.

'Oh ! you're a rare jocular race, all of you. I don't see anything to laugh at, for my part.'

'Nor do I,' said Trelawny, rousing himself into a state of anger. 'Just you go and do your worst outside, or, by Jove, I'll know the reason why. If you want Clive, go to the infernal regions and look for him. You have no right to

come and annoy Madame d'Aubigné with your insolence. You don't suppose she has got your son locked up in a back attic, do you ?'

'You are all a set of blackguards together, conniving to humbug and hoodwink me.'

'Now come, skedaddle—I suppose you know the meaning of that word—or, by Jove ! I'll send that shrimp downstairs to fetch a policeman ; and a night in the station-house will not give you the most pleasing impression of England, let me tell you.'

The American prepared to depart, growling to himself, as he did so, that he would have the house watched day and night, and then he supposed Clive would be caught.

As soon as Trelawny had taken up the cudgels, Mathilde had thrown herself on the sofa as though overcome by terror ; but when he returned to the room after seeing Mr. Baird safely into the street, he found her laughing and bright as ever.

'Upon my word, madam, a fellow could not die of *ennui* in this house, even if he were to try—the excitements you provide are so very varied. Clive had better look out for himself, though ; that is a vindictive old chap.'

'Clive is safe,' said Mathilde, laughing. 'The longer he watches this house, the longer he will be before he finds him.'

'May I have as staunch a friend when I get into trouble !' said Trelawny, kissing her hand.

'I owe you something, *amico*, for your gallant defence to-night.'


And so the curtain fell on this little drama of a day.





CHAPTER XXXII.

ART PHILANDERINGS.

‘ OUR old man’s head has too much light on it ; but I suppose you are going to tone it down a little?’ said Mrs. Clive, a few mornings after her arrival at Brinck Hall, when she and Glory were alone together in the pretty little morning-room, once the scene of Mathilde’s triumphs over Sir Henry.

Glory was engaged on a large oil painting. Her devotion to and love of art had increased greatly of late. Georgie was flitting about the room in her usual erratic way—now arranging some flowers in a vase ; now standing behind Glory, watching the progress of her work, making off-hand, careless remarks the while. Like most idle people, she hated to see any one else profitably employed. She had for some time tried to induce Glory to be tempted by the beauty of the morning, and go with her to look at the old village once again ; but the young artist was positive. So many hours a day she had resolved to devote to her favourite pursuit, and not even Georgie could wean her from her purpose. Thus Mrs. Clive was compelled to content herself with the promise that in the afternoon they would have the pony-carriage and make the tour of the neighbourhood. Glory, however, was not likely to become as absorbed in her work as was her wont while Georgie was prowling about, and incessantly calling her attention to a variety of airy nothings.

‘How this room has changed since I was last here!’ she said. ‘Why, it has become quite business-like—a perfect studio. Should I not like to annihilate some of you workers—you are such bores.’

‘Take to some wholesome occupation yourself, my dear Mrs. Clive. You cannot think what benefit you will derive from it.’

‘Thank you ; the reflex of literary and artistic benefits is quite enough for me. I have been surfeited with clever talk *ad nauseam* all my life.’

‘Oh, how I envy you !—how I should like to know some really clever artistic people !’

‘Indeed ! Well, I suppose I am a horrid Vandal ; but I cannot appreciate them, for the life of me. A composer who sets all the nations of the universe at naught before his new sonata, a poet who thinks his last decade of hexameters worth more than an Imperial crown, may be very good sort of beings in their way, but I would rather not be bored by listening to their raptures.’

‘You have taken an extreme view of things, I suspect,’ said Glory, laughing.

‘Not a bit of it. All these *savants* and artists are so absorbed by the follies which exist in their own brains, that they are only fit companions for each other.’

‘I should be content to live and work among them. How gladly would I devote my life, sacrifice my brightest days on the shrine of Art !’

‘Sit on a high stool, in a blouse, copying some melancholy picture of Delacroix, forgetting that any one else exists on earth but yourself, as I used to see young women doing by the dozen in the French galleries, when I was in Paris. That is what you would like, I suppose ?’

‘Yes,’ said Glory, dreamily. ‘Copying the great masters improves one’s style, of course ; but I should like to originate. Oh ! if I could paint some wonderful picture, which should set all the *connoisseurs*’ hearts beating, then I should die in peace !’

‘Bitten !’ cried Georgie, laughing. ‘Upon my word, I think this feverish thirst after fame, which seems to madden all the literary and artistic small fry, is worse than hydrophobia. But, after all, it is a pity you are left here to pine in solitude, bereft of the sort of freemasonry which seems to exist among the *savants* ; though, let me tell you, there is jealousy enough too. The world has not improved in that respect since the time when Saul envied David his harp-performances. But never mind, you must be initiated into the mysteries of the halls of Genius. Mamma must take you by the hand. If you survive the avalanche of cleverness which will assail you when you first pass the magic portal, probably you will do well.’

'Oh, Mrs. Clive! You will get me introduced to some of these people—how good of you,' and Glory's eyes sparkled with delight.

'What a funny world this is!' said Georgie; 'a few months ago, when I was here, you were frightened to death at the very thought of going into society, and now you are crazy to be launched into the clever clique!'

'Oh, I never know what to say in general society,' answered Glory, 'but among people with whom I can talk of my art, speech, nay, even eloquence, would come.'

'Ah! I never grew tall enough to reach rhapsody, but I dare say it is a very pleasant place when you attain to it. What does Mr. Turner say to all this artistic craving?'

'Oh! he has gone, long ago. Have you not forgotten that nonsense yet?'

'Gone, has he? Then you want a new adorer. By the way, Captain Earlsfort has been here a good deal of late; how did you and he get on?'

'Very well,' said Glory, shortly, as she made a vigorous dash at her picture.

'Upon my word, I am not much of a judge, but that picture of yours is not at all bad—it is beginning to tell out wonderfully. By the way, a bright idea has come to me. Sir Henry has promised to come down here next week, for a few days. I will write and tell him he *must* bring Mr. Dillon with him.'

'Who is Mr. Dillon?'

'The dearest, nicest, handsomest, cleverest old painter that is to be found in London.'

'That is high eulogy, at all events; I should like to see him.'

'So you shall, and if you are not delighted with him, I shall not trouble myself about you any more.'

To introduce Glory and old Dillon was now Georgie's fixed idea, and according to her habit she would worry and torment every one about her till she had accomplished it. Sir Henry was written to at once on the subject. With her usual volatility she seemed entirely to have forgotten the unpleasant little episode which had so recently taken place, and to have centred all her interest in this new whim. She had persuaded Sir Henry, before he left her, that he must return, in a few days, to see how she was getting on, or to save herself from *ennui* she should take herself off elsewhere.

And now she exacted from him a promise that, when he and Captain Earlsfort visited Brinck Hall, Mr. Dillon should accompany them. Georgie almost counted the hours till they should arrive ; she was getting very bored and tired of 'Mouldy Corner,' as she insisted on calling the grand old Hall. Besides, too, she was craving for news of her husband. She had heard nothing of him since the morning she chose to walk from her home, and she was too proud to write and ask for the tidings which both Lady Ida and Sir Henry had withheld. They knew something of this wayward little beauty's character, and thought that silence would make her all the more anxious for news. It was altogether quite time that a reinforcement of ideas should arrive from the busy world to break the monotony of the still life at Brinck Hall ; for Mrs. Clive's tiresome babble and incessant flittings interfered with Glory's dreams over her easel ; while Mrs. Clive herself was beginning to think Glory a very dull companion indeed, now that she had rummaged out all her hoards, made her flippant remarks over all her pictures and sketches, done the country in the little pony-carriage for ten miles round in every direction, and bestowed a few of her saucy sayings on every individual within hail whom she thought worth her notice. She sighed for something new, and shocked Glory's sensibilities not a little by informing her that she thought even a good row with Oswald would be refreshing.

At last the carriage was sent to the station for Sir Henry and his friends, and Georgie, decked in her sweetest smiles, was sitting in the drawing-room waiting for them—or, rather, rushing impatiently to the window every five minutes, to see whether they had yet turned into the avenue.

'Hurrah! here they are!' she cried out at last, with a shout which made poor old nervous Lady Wilbraham shake in her chair. In another moment she was in the hall. Conventionality was a word, she said, she had never even learnt to spell.

'Sir Henry, you have been such a long time coming, I don't think I shall speak to you at all. Mr. Dillon, I am delighted to see you! Now, come along directly, to be introduced to a second Rosa Bonheur. You did not expect me to come out in the new character of a patroness of the fine arts, did you?'

And so Dillon was introduced to Glory, who looked

very shy and uncomfortable under the battery of Georgie's volubility.

'And Captain Earlsfort, where is he?' asked Mrs. Clive, now missing Dick for the first time. 'Don't say he is not coming, because I want him; he is so jolly and full of fun, and keeps one's ideas on the *qui vive*.'

'He was to have met us at the station in London, but as he did not appear, I conjecture he must have missed the train, and will arrive by the next,' answered Sir Henry.

'All right. Now come and look at the pigs, while Glory and Mr. Dillon indulge in mutual art-experiences.'

Sir Henry followed her; but a 'faint cold fear thrilled through his veins,' which reminded him how unwise and imprudent, for his own peace's sake, at least, was this visit he had been induced to pay to Brinck Hall.

On Georgie cares of every sort seemed to sit very lightly, and he looked at her with wondering eyes while she prattled gaily on about the hundred little nothings which had made up her life since she had been in Hampshire. She laughed and chatted in her glib manner, as though neither Clive nor himself had ever had any influence over her life, and as though to her the region swayed by turbulent human passions was a *terra incognita*, instead of the land in which all her best and fondest hopes had been well-nigh wrecked.

'Well, now that I have given you a dissertation on the platitudes, perhaps you will tell me where he has gone?' she said at last.

'He! Who?'

'Why, my husband, of course. Don't look so dismal, you poor old dear! I suppose he has not cut his throat from grief over my departure?'

'He is in Scotland, I believe,' said Sir Henry, gravely. 'He was terribly cut up and annoyed when he found you had left him.'

'Has Madame d'Aubigne gone with him, to console him?'

'Georgie, pray do not be so flippant. Of course she has not. I tell you Clive was really quite upset. I never saw a man look more miserable in my life than he did.'

'Unless it were yourself, when I came into your chambers that morning.'

Sir Henry turned away. He could not bear an allusion

to this subject. Even Georgie had no right to torment him thus.

‘*Povero Enrico*, it shan’t be teased,’ said Georgie, putting her hand on his arm. ‘It strikes me, too, that one had better give heed to the danger-signals, or in some desperate fit of propriety you will be going off in a balloon to the Antipodes, and I shall never see you again. So Oswald is penitent? Well, if he keep up the feeling, and I continue to hear good accounts of him, perhaps I may forgive him—will that satisfy you?’

Sir Henry bowed his head in acquiescence, and the conversation drifted back into a safer channel, till in a few minutes they joined Glory and Mr. Dillon. Poor old Dillon! it was the first time he had set his foot within the stately portals of an English country-house; but though he could not boast of high birth or great connections, yet he was courteous, benevolent, and intelligent—one of Nature’s gentlemen. In his Bohemian world, sixteen quarterings were never heard of; but for all this, he was perfectly and thoroughly at his ease, and already charmed with Glory; while she would fain have knelt down and worshipped this great artist, as in her girlish innocence she believed hard-working, genial old Dillon to be. Could she have seen the two cupboards in which the greater portion of his life was passed, she would probably have been only the more inclined to poetize his history. Thus does extreme youth view the difficulties and privations of life through a romantic, highly-coloured lens.

The carriage, which had been sent back to the station to meet the next train, returned empty. Earlsfort had not arrived; so the little party sat down to dinner without him. Georgie suggested all sorts of wild reasons for his non-appearance, but Sir Henry seemed rather uneasy, and thought it strange he had not telegraphed. That something important had occurred to detain him, he felt sure, for the *penchant* he had manifested for Glory was fast developing itself into a warmer feeling, and he did not therefore think that he would have absented himself for a trivial cause. Still the little party was a cheery one. Georgie was at her brightest; and Dillon gave them so many lights and shadows of his art-life, that the time sped very pleasantly.

‘Isn’t he the dearest Old Vandyck you ever saw?’ asked

Georgie of Miss Fane, as the ladies crossed the big hall, on their way to the drawing-room after dinner.

‘Yes, indeed. It was so good of you to bring him here. His conversation has set me longing to take my palette and sketch-book under my arm, my box of colours in my pocket, and to go a wandering tour in search of the beautiful.’

‘So the spirit of vagabondage is astir within you, is it? I verily believe that no one with an ounce of brains in her cranium would lead, if she could help it, the humdrum, monotonous existence which orthodoxy decides to be the right thing for a young, highly-nurtured English gentlewoman.’

“*Le génie inspire le besoin de la gloire,*” said Glory, her usually pale face suffused with a bright colour.

‘Brava, country mouse!’ cried Georgie, exultingly; ‘don’t allow your light to be hidden under a bushel. I don’t aspire to having any connection with the *genus irritabile*, as somebody calls poets, painters, and the like; but I do rebel most resolutely against the formula which prescribes that “hatched, matched, and despatched” is the only biography that a woman ought to have. Fancy spending a life in which each day only differs from its predecessor by the date of the almanac, and in which you can only trace the lapse of years by seeing the crow’s-feet reflected in your looking-glass!’

‘What a dismal picture!—not much in your line—eh, Georgie?’ laughed Sir Henry, as he and Dillon came into the room together.

‘No—indeed! I always set every law of decorum at naught, as you know.’

‘But you need not instil your strange notions into our quiet little Glory here,’ said Lady Wilbraham. ‘The poor child looks quite bewildered, as though she did not understand all that wild talk.’

‘It will not do her any harm, mother,’ answered Sir Henry, as he patted Glory kindly on the shoulder. ‘She wants a little brisking up. She has got rather dull of late. Have you shown Mr. Dillon any of your pictures, my child?’

‘To the studio!’ cried Georgie, always ready for a move. ‘Now let Apelles sit in judgment!’

So lights were ordered in the morning-room, and thither, with the exception of Lady Wilbraham, the little party adjourned. Dillon examined Glory’s painting with intense pleasure, and some surprise. During his professional career

not a few of the missish performances which young ladies call painting had passed in review before him; but in originality and spirit Glory's so far surpassed anything of the kind he had ever seen, that he was fairly astonished. True, they wanted the finish and correctness which instruction and experience alone can give; but the breath of genius was upon them—that rare gift which the gods are somewhat chary of bestowing on mortals, and which honest Dillon himself had failed to receive, though he did his best to make up for the omission by unremitting industry and perseverance.

It was arranged that the next morning Mr. Dillon should give Glory a few hints on the fundamental principles of her art; and the young girl, talking over her easel with him, was a totally different being from the quiet, shy Glory, who was usually passed by and but little heeded. So the evening sped on, and no one thought of the absent Earlsfort save Sir Henry, who resolved to telegraph to him in the morning, and ascertain for certain what had become of him. Glory never once bestowed a thought on him. She had, perhaps, of late, begun to look for him when Sir Henry came to Brinck Hall; his conversation was cheery and agreeable, and she liked his pleasant, frank manner; but her heart was quite untouched, though, with the natural quick-sightedness of a woman, she had not failed to discover that Dick was just a shade more *empresé* to her than he was to others. She was, however, too absorbed and delighted by the new vista which had opened before her to think of anything else—for the present, at least.

When some hours elapsed, and the telegram which Sir Henry despatched remained unanswered, the baronet grew visibly disconcerted, and resolved to go up to town and look after the missing Dick Earlsfort.

'You always have some absurd crotchet in your head,' observed Mrs. Clive; 'now that we are all jolly and happy together, you cannot keep quiet. Just as if that broad-shouldered, long-bearded Captain Earlsfort could not take care of himself! I'll go into Basingstoke and buy a pap-spoon as a present for him when he does arrive.'

But Georgie's badinage did not turn Sir Henry from his purpose. He had misgivings that all was not well with Dick, and Orestes could not remain in peace while the beloved Py-lades was in danger. So he went off to town, and Mr. Dillon

was left to play cavalier to the ladies for a while—to him no unpleasing office, for he had always been more or less charmed by Mrs. Clive's vivacity and sprightliness, while the gentle Glory, with her strong undercurrent of warm feeling and passionate inspiration, was rapidly turning the good man's head. At night, in his dreams, he painted a picture of Glory as Marguérite Leconte, himself as Watelet, together over the same easel in his little home *atelier*. A picture which, for truthfulness and warm colouring, must gain the approbation of the art critics; but with the morning light the bright sketch was gone. Glory was far above his reach—Watelet must work on to the end without Marguérite. For him there was no Moulin Joli where twin-born talent should work and live together in a long reign of happiness and love.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

LA ROSE DU BERRI.

MORNING in the early Spring. Who has not drunk of its delicious beauties and felt instinct with a new life? The visible work of creation is going on everywhere around, as vegetation develops itself and becomes an existence. The air is fragrant with a thousand scents as the young blossoms cover the trees, and the meadows, descending in a rapid slope to the side of the rippling water, are sprinkled with the crystal dew, which flashes in an infinity of hues as the early sun gilds it with its rays. During the night the foliage seems to have burst into new growth, and to have redoubled the freshness of its verdant colouring. Majestic trees bow their heads over the river, and the sun, as he rises slowly out of his eastern bed, crowns them as with a halo of glorious light. Then myriads of voices seem to wake in joy, and the whole bird-creation bursts forth into song, '*Les oiseaux en chœur se réunissent et saluent de concert le père de la vie.*' All is love, and life, and beauty. Nature, in one harmonious voice of gladness, rejoices in its Creator's work, and glorifies the great Father in a universal *Te Deum*. It is a short reign of purity and peace, a brief reminiscence of the early Eden days, before sin marred the loveliness of earth.

The brilliant rays of the magnificent day-star are deepening and strengthening in their power, and the mysterious vapours of early morning have nearly disappeared before them; and now, from the little village church in the distance the angelus bell wakes the echoes far and near. Actual life has begun once more, and the peasant, crossing himself as he hears the village bell, is a sad reminder that of all created things man alone fought with his Creator, and can regain his

heritage of gladness and of joy but by journeying slowly along the pathway of pain and sorrow.

A faint streak of blue smoke is curling slowly up among the foliage, which is becoming so thick as to almost hide from view a tiny cottage with a moss-covered roof, which nestles in the shade of the trees. At the door of this cabin, so poor in worldly wealth, but so richly endowed with its surroundings of beauty, there is standing an old woman, clad in the picturesque garments of the country. She is wrinkled and hardened, and bent from age, but yet there is a light in her countenance which tells of perpetual youth. It is the light of faith. The simplicity and trust of childhood are still hers, for the great world-torrents which have both mentally and physically devastated so many others of the human family, have left her unscathed. She knows naught of either their violence or their power. From her infancy till the present time she has dwelt in that same spot, leading an even, unruffled life, gaining her daily bread by the sweat of her brow. Death, it is true, has occasionally visited her little home, but though Nannette has wept for a time over those who have gone before her to their rest, yet, recognising the goodness and wisdom of the Almighty, she has rejoiced that they have been taken from this life of toil. One legacy of love too had been left her, that her old age might not be bereft of every joy—her little grand-daughter, ‘*La Rose du Berri*,’ as she was called by the villagers for many miles round her home. Born in one of the loveliest spots in France, the pretty child who bore this title seemed to reflect the beauty which reigned around, and to drink it in with the air she breathed. She was so joyous, so happy, carolling with the birds, frisking with the young lambs, and loving everything in nature, with the intensity of a character whose very element was love.

‘Lorsque Vénus, sortant du sein des mers,
Sourit aux dieux charmés de sa presence,
Un nouveau jour éclaira l’univers,
Dans ce moment la rose prit naissance.’

For seventeen years now she has been alike the joy and the pride of the *bourg* in which she dwells. From the honest, simple-hearted curé, to the meanest peasant in the neighbourhood, every one seems to think *La Rose* his peculiar

charge ; and a word or a look which would have raised a blush on her cheek, or a tear in her eye, would have been revenged fourfold.

As old Nannette stands at the door of the cottage, shielding her eyes with her hand—for the sun's rays have become dazzling in their power—she is awaiting the return of her child, who may be heard singing sweetly, with her fresh, young voice, as she comes slowly through the forests of vegetation in which Le Berri is so fecund and so rich. Now, she sets down her milk-can, to gather some of the spring flowers which lie as a carpet under her feet ; to chase the young squirrels as they spring from bough to bough over her head ; or to play with the emerald creatures which make their bed among the thick entanglement of rushes, on the banks of the hundred streamlets which meander peacefully under the thick foliage, and form the chief characteristic of this part of the country.

‘You went out early, my child,’ said the good grandmother, when La Rose at last came up to her.

‘Yes, *petite maman* ; long before you were awake. It was such a lovely morning. I went as far as the great *écluse*, with Raphael, to see his new boat. He was painting it all yesterday ; and it is so bright and gay. It will be the envy and the wonder of every one who sees it. It is not a bit like any other boat there, either. Raphael must be very clever to build a boat such as no one at Tours has ever seen.’

‘What do you know about Tours, and what the people have seen ? You have never been there.’

La Rose tossed her pretty head.

‘But I have ears, *tite mère*, have I not ?—and I can keep them open, too, when the talk is of Raphael. There was a great boatman, who came over here yesterday, and praised Raphael's boat till the tears came into my eyes with delight. He said if Raphael would go and follow the calling of a boatman on the Loire, instead of dabbling in the Indre, which he had the impertinence to call “*une petite rivière mesquine et sale*,” he would make his fortune.’

‘And is Raphael going to follow his advice ?’

La Rose grew pale.

‘Oh ! no, *chère mère*, I hope not. If Raphael goes, I must go too ; and I should never bear to be shut up in a city. Bah ! he will not go ; he is too happy here with his

Rose. Fancy his preferring a boat on a big river to giving me pleasure ! And I would far rather stay here. How could I leave you, *vieille mère ?*' And she threw her arms round the old woman, and embraced her affectionately. 'It is silly to think of anything so foolish as that Raphael will go away from here.' And she laughed merrily, as she began to arrange the morning meal.

La Rose had not been exempted from woman's heritage—coquetry. Even in this peaceful, poetical retreat, the serpent's gifts, through Eve, to all her daughters, had not failed to be distributed ; and she was fully sensible of the influence her beauty had over Raphael, when, as not unfrequently, she teased him to comply with some small whim. Her whole face beamed once more with happiness when he himself now entered the cabin, and smiling graciously on its inmates, seated himself at the table.

He was beautiful as the girl, but of a totally different type. His features were finely and delicately chiselled, and there was a thoughtful expression on his pale face, which would have been almost sad, but for the marvellous light which shone in his large speaking eyes, and the sweet smile which perpetually played round his well-shaped mouth. The refinement of his boyish beauty was in great contrast to hers, which consisted chiefly in the freshness of its rich colouring and the sparkle of geniality and playfulness with which she was ever effervescing. Her eyes were all gladness and merriment, her luscious looking full lips all love and warmth. La Rose was no ethereal being, neither a shadow nor a poem, but a very woman, the embodiment of passion. By nature she was expansive and caressive. Married but a few weeks, she was still a thorough child. She lavished her love on Raphael, with all the fulness of a fond untutored heart ; and, in the natural reticence of the boy's disposition, he received it with eagerness, and drank in with avidity the intoxicating delights which, in all simplicity and good faith, she offered him.

The morning meal being ended, Raphael rose to return to his boat. He had called it 'La Rose,' out of compliment to his young wife ; perhaps too, because it, in a great measure, divided his attention with the living Rose.

'*Tu ne viens pas, ma mie ?*' he asked, as he stood on the threshold of the door.

'Not yet, *mon ami*,' she answered, as she put up her mouth to be kissed. 'I must spare the *vieille mère's* legs, by taking home some linen she has been washing. But, before *midi*, I shall have returned; and I will bring *à manger et un litre du vin du pays*, and we will sit together under the shade of the boat and be oh! so happy, *mon Raphael*! We will have *une vraie fête*—how did you call that long word yesterday?'

'*Une fête d'Arcadie, petite biche*,' he answered, laughing.

'Ah! well,' she said, 'I don't know what it means; but I know you are my own dear, beautiful Raphael, and that as long as I have you, I hope this joyous life will never end.'

And so, with another loving kiss, they parted; and Rose, with her basket of clothes, prepared for her walk across the meadows to a house called La Folie Blanche, which was about two miles from their pretty cottage. For some half-a-mile, Rose's way lay along the bank of the river. The sun was now high over her head, and had dried up the dew which in the early morning had lain on the pathway like a sheet of silver. It was a lovely walk; the river was murmuring slowly over its pebbly bed, so clear and fresh the while that you could see, as in a glass, thousands of little fishes playfully regaling themselves in the sunshine. But Rose wanted to get back to Raphael, so she did not stop to admire the beauties of nature, as she probably would otherwise have done. She sped over the fallen tree which served for a bridge at the narrow part of the river, and walked across the meadows which led to the Folie Blanche. It was a square, white house, with a low, sloping roof, and a large gravelled courtyard before it. A quaint, mediæval-looking place, supposed to have been in existence when, early in the fifteenth century, Charles VII., who was called derisively, '*Le Roi de Bourges*,' peopled this part of the country with his followers, and filled the entire *Pays du Berri* with his favourites and his *amours*. From some adventure or romance of that period, it had probably derived its name.

Rose made a little *détour*, and entering the old-fashioned premises by the back-door, she walked into the kitchen. There, very busy frying a savoury dish over a little charcoal fire, stood the mistress of the Folie Blanche. She was a well-made, imposing-looking woman, with a loud laugh and

a shrill voice. There was a certain air about her, too, which showed she had not always been a *campagnarde*, but that she knew something more than most of her neighbours about the workings of life in the great cities.

'*Tiens, c'est la Rose,*' she said, looking up from her occupation. 'Sit down, my child; you look hot and tired after your long walk in the sun. So the good *mère* Nannette has done the washing I sent her? I hope the shirts are well ironed, for the Monsieur who has come to stay with us for his health, *pauvre cher homme*, is *un peu dandy* in his habits.'

'*Maman Nannette* was always well spoken of for her *repassage*,' answered La Rose, with a little toss.

'*Ne te faches pas, mon enfant,*' said Madame Philippean, with her loud, hoarse laugh. 'I have no doubt they are all right. *Dame!* this dish will be spoiled if it wait much longer before it be eaten. Monsieur Domet,' she screamed, at the top of her voice, and in another moment Jerome entered the kitchen.

Suspicious of every stranger, he looked inquiringly at Rose, who got up, and made a curtsy; then he smiled graciously on her—the fresh face of the young girl pleased him. However, he took up the dish Madame Philippean offered him, and carried it off for Mr. Clive's breakfast, or, as he was called in these parts, M. Clavier.

'*Ce pauvre Monsieur*, is he very ill?' asked Rose, pityingly.

'*Dame*, what have this *jeune Monsieur* and his ailments to do with you, Madame Rose, *puisque tu es mariée, toi, enfant que tu es?*'

Rose pouted, and thought her handsome Raphael was probably ten times better-looking than this stranger; she had but asked after him out of compassion; it was very certain, too, that Raphael was much more clever. Why, he could speak English, and had built a boat, which she was quite sure the dandy who lived at Folie Blanche could not do. However, she had the wisdom to hold her tongue; and Madame Philippean, who had no farther interest in Raphael save that she thought him a good-looking, good-tempered boy, who always had a pleasant smile when he put her across the river in his boat, made no farther observation

on the subject. Rose waited a little while, till Madame Philippean's culinary duties were finished ; and then, having received some more things to be washed, and a large pat of butter as a present for *la vieille Nannette*, she started once more for the little moss-covered cabin, which she thought a great deal prettier than that great ugly house ; and she did not envy Madame Philippean in the least, although during her service in the great world she had probably made enough money to buy up the entire 'bourg.' But Rose was very happy and contented. True, they were poor ; but to live in this part of the country does not entail the unending struggle which the working-classes have not unfrequently to fight through, when their lot is cast in the large cities.

Singing gaily as she pursued her way, Rose had not proceeded far before she met *le curé de paroisse*. She put down her bundle, and saluted the good father with, for her, an unusual amount of gravity.

'*Tiens*, Madame Rose, I have not seen you for some time. How are you getting on, my child ?'

'We are as happy as birds, Monsieur le Curé.'

'And Raphael—has he launched his new boat yet ?'

'It is not quite finished.'

'He must make haste about it. The fine weather has already set in ; and in the summer is the time, when, following his calling as a boatman, he must make money, and lay up stores for the winter.'

'Raphael has no fear for the future. He says, when money is wanted, it will not fail to come.'

'The mere trustfulness of youth. Money will not come without work, *ma petite* Rose.'

'Have no fear, Monsieur le Curé ; *mon* Raphael is not idle, and neither is he poor. It was but yesterday I saw fifteen gold pieces, which he had put away in a little box.'

A cloud for a moment passed over the features of the simple-hearted curé. In the *vallée*, the possessor of fifteen gold pieces was rich ; and he did not feel quite satisfied about the manner in which Raphael might have obtained this amount of money. However, he did not wish to fill pretty Rose's mind with suspicions of her husband, so he merely answered—

'Even fifteen gold pieces will not last for ever, and with-

out work the wolf will come sooner or later to the door. You have been married nearly six weeks, my child, and in all that time I don't think Raphael has earned ten sous.'

Rose pouted; she did not like her husband to be found fault with, even by Monsieur le Curé.

'*C'est bon,*' she said; '*s'il n'aime pas le travail, lui, moi je sais travailler.*'

The priest smiled, and patted her kindly on the shoulder.

'Do not spoil him too much,' he said, 'or you may live to regret it. I will have a little talk with him myself some of these days.'

And so they parted. But Rose did not sing now; she was quiet and full of care.

'Why should Raphael work, if it do not please him?' she thought, in her naughty little heart; 'and, after all, what right has Monsieur le Curé to interfere?'

Neither was the good priest's brow cloudless as he pursued his solitary walk. He did not altogether understand this young Raphael, and doubted whether they had been quite wise in allowing their pretty Rose to become his wife. He seemed a careless, dreaming sort of fellow, who would lie for hours together smoking his pipe in the shade, instead of bestirring himself and doing some honest work—especially now, too, when he had a young wife to keep. He was not wanting either in ingenuity or cleverness. The boat he had built was a little gem; but then he had devoted himself to it in the most *dilettante* fashion, more as though he were enjoying a pastime than following a trade. Altogether, the good priest was far from satisfied; and he resolved, on the very first opportunity, to have some serious and kindly talk with the handsome, pensive-looking Raphael, who, be it said, had always avoided, as much as possible, being brought in close contact with Monsieur le Curé.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

TIT FOR TAT.



GROUP of men were standing talking and smoking together at the door of the 'Raleigh,' when a hansom cab drove up, and Sir Henry Wilbraham sprang out of it.

'Is Earlsfort here?' he asked hurriedly, as he prepared to make his way into the club.

'Earlsfort, by Jove! no,' answered one of the men; 'don't you know that he is quodded?'

'Nonsense, my dear Prince! Don't play the fool; I really want to find him.'

'Never spoke stricter truth in my life. That infernal scoundrel, Biggs, collared him yesterday, at the suit of one Madame d'Aubigné. You had better keep your cab, and drive on a little farther, if you want to find him.'

Sir Henry seemed to be struck dumb, and without holding farther parley with his friends, he drove off.

It was but too true—in a gloomy, wretched hole Sir Henry found Dick Earlsfort. Poor Dick!—he looked very dejected and forlorn as he sat there smoking and sipping alcohol. He was trying by their aid to cheat thought, but he did not succeed very well. Visions of Brinck Hall and Glory's fresh young face would haunt him, and make him curse with bitterness the woman who, out of sheer malice, had reduced him to this unpleasant position. He started up when the door opened and Sir Henry entered, and there was a strange look of mingled joy and annoyance on his bronzed, frank countenance.

'Why, Dick, what the deuce does this mean?' asked the Baronet, as he shook his friend warmly by the hand.

‘Confound that woman d’Aubigné’s machinations, that is what it means!’ answered Dick, fiercely.

‘But what has she to do with you, my dear boy? I thought you abhorred the very sight of her—surely you have not been borrowing money of her?’

‘I borrow money of Madame d’Aubigné! I would sooner make a journey down into the shades below, and sign a compact with the arch-fiend himself. No, but without my knowledge, she has got hold of a bit of paper of mine, which I thought was in Dickson’s hands, and was all straight and square till next month, when I meant to renew it. It seems I got a wrong date in my head or my note book. It was this month the thing became due. Madame d’Aubigné, by some of her infernal machinations, having got it into her hands, of course there was no mercy for me in that quarter. Whether they ever sent a notice that it was due, is best known to themselves; anyhow, it never reached me. The first announcement which came to me was the serving of a writ; and while I was beating about the bush to see what could be done, hang me if that infernal woman or her agents did not swear that I was about to bolt out of the country, and have me quodded at once. But I’ll be even with Madame d’Aubigné yet before I die; she is not so very unimpeachable that she can afford to play these little pranks.’

‘My dear Dick, why did you not come to me, instead of involving yourself with money-lenders? I had no notion you were in difficulties.’

‘I got into trouble when I first entered the service, some ten years ago; and the fact is, I have never got properly on my legs again. When my old uncle dies, as you know, I must come into a tolerably good property; so I have expected every year that matters would mend; but not a bit of it—every Christmas has found me the same wretched pauper that I was the preceding one.’

‘What is the extent of this present troublesome liability?’

‘500*l*. I have written to my uncle to see if he will send me the money; but here I am till I get his answer.’

‘Nonsense, old boy, that I will not allow. Who is the person to negotiate with?’

Earlsfort gave him the address of a flashy West-end pettifogger, and Sir Henry started off to get possession of poor Dick’s unfortunate bit of paper.

A few hours later the two friends entered the 'Raleigh' together, but for the time all the fun and merriment had died out of Captain Earlsfort's face. He was seriously and intensely annoyed at what had happened. Sir Henry Wilbraham was the last man he had wished should have become acquainted with the state of his affairs; it had been his dream of late that Glory would one day be his wife, and he did not fancy that the knowledge of the pecuniary difficulties in which he was involved would add to his chance. Glory too was more or less of an heiress, and it galled Earlsfort to think that now Sir Henry might imagine it was for her money he would woo her. The two men dined together, and under the influence of good cheer and the juice of the grape, Earlsfort recovered something of his old form.

'By what train shall we go down to Hampshire in the morning?' asked Sir Henry, when they had nearly finished dinner.

'By none, as far as I am concerned,' was the curt answer.

'May I ask why?'

'Well, partly because I do not care to face the inmates of your house until I have somewhat got over, in my own mind at least, the unpleasant occurrences of the last twenty-four hours; but chiefly because I have something important to do in town.'

'Sir Henry looked astonished, and Earlsfort continued:

'You know the old proverb, my dear Hal, about its being dangerous to play with edge-tools,—so Madame d'Aubigné shall find, or my name is not Richard Earlsfort. I'll hunt her to the death before I have done! I'll watch her, and track her wherever she goes; and I don't know my game if I am very long before I get a chance of giving her a Roland for her Oliver.'

'Going to take your ill-temper out in a little revenge, eh?' laughed Sir Henry. 'You had better put it off till next week, and come and join our family party for a few days.'

'And lose both my scent and my inclination. No, no, I shall enjoy the society of your fair belongings much more when I have got rid of a little superfluous wrath.'

So Sir Henry was compelled to return to Brinck Hall alone; the only promise he could get from his friend being

that he would join him in a day or two, when he had got the detective force which he intended to bring to bear on Madame d'Aubigné, in full play.

The first place to which Earlsfort directed his steps, when, on the following morning he started out to reconnoitre, was to the little house in Mayfair. He wished to thank Mathilde, *in propria personâ*, for her kind intentions towards him. He was very acute and deep, was Dick Earlsfort, and he had never yet had an interview with the lady in question in which he had not discovered something, of which she would have been better pleased had he remained in ignorance.

But on this occasion he was destined to be foiled, for after knocking and ringing several times at the door, it was at last opened by a slatternly-looking woman, who informed him that 'Madame had gone to Paris that very morning, and would not be back for some weeks.'

'Ho ! ho !' thought Earlsfort to himself as he turned away, 'what the deuce is up now, I wonder ? My lady is not in the habit of doing anything without a motive. Something of importance has taken her across the herring-pond,—that is to say, if that be really the route she has taken. She is as slippery as Old Nick, and is just as likely to have gone in a diametrically opposite direction ;' and he stood at the corner of the street, meditating for a few minutes. To find out whether Mathilde were really in Paris was very easy, but to find out why she had gone there would require far more tact and shrewdness.

'I'll pay the old mum'ny at Pimlico a visit,' he said to himself ; 'she may know a thing or two ; anyhow, a quarter of an hour's conversation with her will rather amuse me.'

So, as on a previous occasion, Captain Earlsfort, in a hansom cab, arrived at Mrs. Baird's door, and was shown by Sally, of the carrotty locks, into the dingy parlour. Seated by the window, gazing vacantly into the street, was old Sternheim. His arrival under her roof had proved that there were green spots in Mrs. Baird's arid, hard nature, for ever since her brother-in-law had brought the poor old man, and consigned him to her woman's care, she had tended and watched over him with a solicitude and an amount of attention of which no one perhaps would have believed Mrs. Baird to be capable. The sight of old Sternheim's forlorn helplessness seemed to have evoked all the kindly feeling

which was latent in her nature. She received Captain Earlsfort with more cordiality than was her wont.

'Our common foe, Madame d'Aubigné, has, it seems, started for Paris,' said Dick, after he had sympathized with Mr. Sternheim, and offered the usual little courteous amenities to the mistress of the house.

'The farther she keeps away from respectable people, the better,' was the tart answer. 'They are all a tricky, jabbering lot together in France, so perhaps they will appreciate her humbugging, plausible ways.'

Dick could not help laughing at the bigotry which would annihilate a whole nation in one fell swoop, on account of the shortcomings and peccadilloes of one unworthy individual.

'What new crime has she committed?' he asked, for he thought Mrs. Baird seemed more than usually testy about her.

'She had that poor old man concealed in her house till my brother-in-law rescued him, and brought him here. Now, for what purpose, I ask you, could she have had him there but for an evil one. If you can give Madame d'Aubigné credit for any good action, it is more than I can do.'

'Oh! I am not in the least disposed to assign good motives to her deeds. I have the very worst opinion of her,' said Earlsfort, fiercely. 'But you spoke of your brother-in-law. Is he the father of the missing Ralph?'

'The same. He has come to England, at great trouble and inconvenience, expressly to hunt up that miserable Clive; and now he is nowhere to be found—has gone off to Scotland, on a wandering tour.'

'Is Mr. Baird here? Would it be possible for me to have an interview with him?'

'Yes. He is writing some letters in the back-room. I will call him.'

In a few minutes John Baird entered, and Earlsfort speedily formed an alliance with the ungainly, angular-looking American. They discussed the business which had brought him to England, in all its bearings; and Baird, who was very ignorant of the 'Britishers' ways,' was only too glad to obtain so knowing and sharp-witted an ally as Dick Earlsfort seemed likely to prove.

'Clive in Scotland, Madame d'Aubigné in Paris—that won't do,' said Dick, after he had heard all the Bairds had

to tell him, and been enlightened about the little scene between Mathilde and the American, which had taken place in the house in Mayfair. 'Where the goose is, there we shall find the gander—of that you may be sure. The range of my acquaintance in the French capital is an extensive one, and I can easily ascertain if the lady really has taken up her quarters there. If so, Mr. Baird, our plan is to go and amuse ourselves quietly in French haunts. I will put you up to a thing or two.'

'What good will that do?—Madame d'Aubigné had not the charge of my son. I cannot make her responsible for him. When she was here under my hand I could not touch her.'

'By Jove! my good friend, we shall not be long on her track before we ascertain the whereabouts of Clive. If she is in Paris, depend on it he is hidden in some part of France.'

'Are they so tied up in this matter as all that? Why, he is married.'

'I don't think that is a subject which troubles either of these good-for-nothing individuals very much; but, by the way, Clive's wife is a nice, pretty little thing. I should not like her to be unnecessarily annoyed by her husband's well-merited punishment.'

'I should not think she need be considered very much,' growled Mrs. Baird, who invariably became 'riled' when Georgie was mentioned. 'The greatest calamity would not affect her very seriously, she is of too heartless and frivolous a nature.'

'So much the better, considering the sort of blackguard she has got for a husband,' answered Earlsfort; 'she is down at Brinck Hall, staying with the Wilbrahams, so I hope she will be spared the anxiety she might otherwise feel about this inquiry.'

'Lord Bacon tells us that "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out,"' said Mrs. Baird; 'let us hope that in this instance justice will be done, and my poor nephew found, without any of us descending to the meanness and small-mindedness which prompt revenge.'

'I am afraid I cannot view things from such an exalted point as you do,' answered Earlsfort, laughing; 'I should like to have a very neatly devised, cunning bit of revenge on

Madame d'Aubigné, who has lately played me a very dirty trick ; as for Clive, poor beggar, I have no personal animosity against him. He is a weak, vacillating fool, who follows that vile designing woman wherever she chooses to lead him. When we get at the bottom of this story, depend upon it we shall find she had more to do with the boy's disappearance than he had.'

'He shall smart for it, though,' said John Baird, curtly. 'I don't understand waging war with women.'

'That is as you like,' answered Earlsfort ; 'but, in the meantime, will you leave the detective part of the business to my management, and consent to act under my direction?'

'With pleasure. I am only too glad to get rid of the intricacies of the business, which is not in my line. "Hit hard and go ahead," is my motto.'

'Agreed then ; and if you will come to my rooms about this time to-morrow,' said Earlsfort, giving him a card, 'I may have obtained some information.'

So they parted. Old Sternheim rose and made a stately bow as Earlsfort took his leave, but did not speak—in fact he seldom spoke now. It was evident that he had recognised John Baird, and some instinctive feeling reminded him that he had a secret to conceal from him, so he guarded it by an obstinate silence.

Earlsfort now directed his steps to the telegraph office, and addressed a telegram to a certain M. Maxime, who resided in a small street close to the Boulevard St. Martin ; he requested him to find out as soon as possible the whereabouts of Madame d'Aubigné, if she was in Paris. Then he went to a dirty house in one of the slums in London, where dwelt a detective officer of his acquaintance, and employed him to watch the tiny house in Mayfair. This step, however, was unproductive of result ; there were no visitors save the pot-boy, no exits and entrances save those of the woman in charge, going backwards and forwards on her own little errands. However, twenty-four hours had not elapsed before an answer came from M. Maxime.

'*Madame d'Aubigné, Rue Chaussée d'Antin, No. 12, un appartement garni.*'

'*A la bonne heure !*' cried Earlsfort, when he read it ; now *en route pour la grande capitale !*

Baird came in soon afterwards, and the two men agreed

to start for Paris that very same evening ; but while Earlsfort, with his extensive knowledge of the workings of busy life in the French capital, made use of all his talents in watching Madame d'Aubigné, it was decided that Baird should remain in the background, and, if possible, keep entirely concealed from Mathilde's notice.

For the present, therefore, the visit to Brinck Hall must be given up ; and there was no alternative but to write Sir Henry a letter, informing him how matters stood. Had Earlsfort known how gradually and steadily Dillon was ingratiating himself in Glory's favour, perhaps he would not so readily have resigned his position, and gone off to wage war against Madame d'Aubigné.

'If Captain Earlsfort is not coming down to play Pylades,' said Georgie to Sir Henry, when she heard the contents of Dick's letter, 'I suppose you will have a moping fit and go off to town, to console yourself at your club ; so I vote that we all remove to London together. The poor old mother must have had enough of her own society by this time, notwithstanding her pianoforte recitals, art re-unions, and literary coteries. Besides, I think the fusion of a little fresh blood would brisk up the *savants* a little—Heaven knows they want it ! so I have it on my mind to introduce Glory.'

'Why, you surely do not think our little quiet Glory is capable of coping with the strong-minded individuals who abound at Lady Ida's parties ?'

'She has her art, and is somewhat of a proficient in it, too ; while more than half of these would-be-clever people collect a few cant phrases and technical words, and then try to humbug the ignorant about the amount of learning of which they are possessed. Oh ! I have had a good deal of experience among them, and I am very capable of separating the wheat from the tares, I can tell you.'

'I wonder you don't start a subject yourself and enter the lists,' said Sir Henry, laughing.

'Turn an "Unsectarian Revivalist," and go about to preach in barns and booths. I might do that certainly, with you at hand to supply the texts and the matter. Well, it would be rather fun. But, to the point ; may Glory come up to town and stay with me for a little while ? She will not be utterly polluted, for she is nearly as good at preaching as you are.'

Sir Henry agreed most readily ; he was only too thankful to hear Georgie make the suggestion that she should return to her home. True, her husband was absent, but that he would ere long return, and matters would be made up, was his fervent hope. How greatly did he now rejoice that he had remained firmly in the path of duty, on that morning in London when Georgie, in her excitement, had paid his chambers a visit ? The very recollection of the scene which had passed between them seemed to have faded from her mind. She was perfectly joyous and happy, and ready to be amused by any trifle, as she had ever been.

In the course of a few days Glory accompanied Mrs. Clive to Lady Ida Trant's house. It was the first visit she had paid to London for any length of time, and the novelty of the scene, together with the anticipation of the charming life she expected to lead in the haunts of literature and art, worked up her usually placid temperament almost to fever-point. If all the *habitués* of Lady Ida's drawing room were like Mr. Dillon, in what an Utopia was she going to reside ! But in this she was doomed to disappointment. Glory's powers of detecting truth from falseness were too keen, her tastes too really artistic, for her to be deceived by the large amount of base alloy which was mixed up with a very small quota of real gold by these so-called *savants*. Mr. Dillon himself, though he had not been touched by the hand of genius, was at least honest and natural. Pedantry and affectation were alike abhorrent to him. Thus he continued to hold the first place in Glory's good opinion, and among the numbers of artistes and *litterati* who flocked to Lady Ida's '*Thés savants*,' as Georgie called her mother's parties, there was no one whom Glory received with more delight than honest, genial, true-hearted old Dillon.





CHAPTER XXXV.

HAWK-EYES.

MADAME D'AUBIGNÉ had been already several days in Paris, and was thoroughly installed in her new quarters in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. They were very vast and handsomely furnished, but prosaic, commonplace, and *bourgeois* to the very highest degree. Mathilde's agent had engaged them from the widow of a rich banker, a sworn enemy to *bric-à-brac*; and though there was no want of money apparent in the furnishing, yet everything bore that unmistakable trace of the upholsterer which was especially displeasing to Mathilde, who so thoroughly appreciated the thousand little addenda which form the grace and the charm of a well-appointed home.

The cold, bare look of the large rooms probably helped to depress her, for she was lying listlessly on the sofa, as though life had no object—the world no interest. Newspapers and books were scattered in profusion round her, but they did not seem to be productive of amusement, for Mathilde had thrown herself back, head on hands, as was her wont, while her thoughts seemed to have wandered far away, and there was a weary look in her large dark eyes.

The maid entered with a card in her hand.

'A gentleman, madame, wishes particularly to see you.'

'I thought I told you, Jacquette, that I was at home to no one. Is it not a misery that one cannot have one little half-hour of peace!'

'Le Monsieur was so very importunate. He said he knew madame would see him, so I was at last induced to bring in his card.'

Mathilde held out her hand for it.

‘Cis Trelawny—*à la bonne heure*—show him in,’ and she woke up from her lethargy, and lounged back gracefully, as she awaited the entrance of her visitor.

‘At last I have found you, *chère* madame!’ he said, taking her hand. ‘Do you think it is either fair or kind to have given me the slip, and to have started off to Paris without one word of adieu?’

‘I was bored to extinction by those heavy stolid English, so I came off at a moment’s notice to amuse myself here, if it be possible, but I have not yet got rid of the oppression.’

‘He looked at her for a moment and smiled.’

‘You came here to be nearer Clive, whose hiding-place is not very far off, I fancy. Acknowledge now that I know your heart-secrets better than you thought I did.’

‘These remarks are indiscreet, Mr. Trelawny. If I have any other reason for being in Paris than the one I have given you, it belongs to my private life. You are bound to accept what I tell you, and feel flattered that you have been admitted, in spite of the *consigne*.’

Cis Trelawny bowed.

‘Your wishes shall be obeyed; and as in Paris the art of amusing oneself is the supreme talent, what say you to at once seeking to displace *ennui* from her throne?’

‘As you like. I lend an attentive ear to your suggestions, but, if possible, let us have something new. I am already tired of the Bois, the shops, and the cafés.’

‘My poor queen, you are more severely attacked by that very English malady, the spleen, than I had imagined. All the world goes to-day to the little *paillon* in the Avenue de l’Impératrice, where La Vénétie used to live—say, shall we join the throng?’

‘Who is La Vénétie, and why is everybody going to her house to-day? Enlighten me. You forget I am as yet but a neophyte in Parisian mysteries.’

‘La Vénétie was *the* most bewitching little singer who ever trod the boards. She died last winter of consumption, poor child. To-morrow they are going to sell her effects, so this afternoon the great world rushes in crowds to see the most charming little nest art ever designed, or money helped to adorn.’

‘And the threshold of which these great ladies would not

have soiled their skirts by crossing during the life-time of its mistress !' said Madame d'Aubigné, with a sneer.

'Probably not,' laughed her companion ; 'but at the same time not a few of them will enrich their boudoirs with some of La Vénétie's choicest treasures, and learn a lesson too in the art of decoration from the poor, slighted, luxury-loving artiste. So rolls the ball of modern society in Imperial Paris.'

'And by way of something novel in excitement, we are to go to the sale at Mlle. Vénétie's?'

'Yes. It is not every day one has such a chance ; and you must acknowledge it has its charm.'

'A melancholy one, my dear Cis ; there is something rather ghastly in the idea of this well-dressed mob of heartless mockers passing their inane remarks over the poor child's household gods, and desecrating even her death-chamber with the tramp of their aristocratic feet ; but it is life. Yes, we will go—I have a fancy to see this sight.'

And about an hour later, the elegant little carriage Mathilde had engaged to be at her disposal during her residence in Paris, conveyed them to the pavilion in the Avenue de l'Impératrice.

Trelawny had predicted rightly—all Paris was there. Madame la Duchesse and Madame la Marquise, with their proud carriage and lofty bearing, jostled against *les petites demoiselles sans nom*, who had come to select some touching souvenirs of the days when La Vénétie was in health and spirits, and her house had been the favourite resort on more than one festive occasion. The furniture of this little retreat was pretty and elegant, without being costly, soft colours were artistically blended together, and the owner had evidently relied more on her own taste than trusted to that of the upholsterer. But what struck the eye of a connoisseur were the wonderful art-gems which were scattered here and there throughout this miniature abode. In the entrance hall you were greeted by some statuettes of Parian marble, life-like in their exquisite chiselling. In the tiny rose-curtained drawing-room, bits of rare Venetian glass stood side by side with a vase of the unmistakable design of Benvenuto Cellini. Then a specimen of Palissy pottery claimed your attention, only that it might instantly be withdrawn to regard with a longing eye a cup and saucer of the finest Sèvres. There

were one or two velvet-covered tables too, which were trimmed with some choice old Flemish lace, which would not have disgraced a duchess's court train. In the bed-room of this queen of the *foyer* was a looking-glass in a Dresden frame, which would of itself command a crowd of gazers ; and on a tiny table draped with blue satin and point d'Alençon, stood an exquisite tea-service of the celebrated Rose Dubarry china.

Madame d'Aubigné looked at all these things in a sort of maze, then she sank down on a soft downy sofa.

'Tell me, Cis, something of the history of this girl. How did she become possessed of all these treasures? This is surely no ordinary sale.'

'La Vénétie was the only daughter of a queer old Italian who kept what we call a curiosity shop over in the Quartier St. Denis. The old fellow was very rich, and brought his child up like a young princess ; but she was gifted with a wonderful voice, and the old man could not quell the adventuress' spirit within her, though he tried hard enough, Heaven knows ! When she was about sixteen she ran away from him, and began her career on the stage. The old fellow forgave her, but he never looked up again, and died shortly afterwards. La Vénétie thus became mistress of a considerable amount of money. She chose the gems she fancied the most out of her father's collection, and sold the rest by auction ; but she did not give up her profession, in which, probably, poor child, she would have attained great success, had she not been wafted into another world just at the very beginning of her triumphs.'

'What a melancholy tale !' said Mathilde, musingly. 'You brought me here that I might be *désennuyée*, and you have succeeded in making me quite *triste*. Tell me, Cis, did you know this girl?'

'Of course I did. What man who is at all *répandu* in Paris did not know La Vénétie?'

'Then all I can say is, it does not say much for your sensitiveness that you can come here coolly and rummage over her treasures among this heartless crowd.'

'*Que voulez-vous, ma chère Madame*, life is too short to be spent in tears. Were I to indulge in your fits of depression, I should hang myself before a week were out.'

‘Madame d’Aubigné depressed ! That is surely a new feature in her character,’ said a voice from behind them.

Mathilde looked round, and somewhat to her discomfiture, beheld Dick Earlsfort. He, too, had come to charm his senses with a sight of the art-beauties at La Vénétie’s sale.

‘Captain Earlsfort !’ stammered Mathilde, quite at a loss for words.

Now that she had had her revenge, the reaction had come, and she was just a little bit afraid of what Dick might do or say. He, however, made no allusion to the subject, but dropped into a seat beside her, and began to talk over the events of the day in his cheery, off-hand manner ; in fact, he made himself so thoroughly agreeable and pleasing that Mathilde was quite bewildered, and began to wonder if her little shaft had really taken aim. Trelawny, too, came in for a share of Earlsfort’s present genial humour ; but he received his courteous advances rather sulkily—he did not care to be taken up and let down at Captain Earlsfort’s good pleasure. However, the trio finished the inspection of the house together, and as Earlsfort put Madame d’Aubigné into her carriage at the door, he whispered a hope that she was gratified now that she had had her revenge.

‘Come to the Rue de la Chaussée d’Antin this evening, and you will receive a warm welcome,’ was her answer, as she smiled and showed her white teeth.

Womanlike, now that she had made a stab with her little dagger, she was beginning to think that it would be a wise measure to have Captain Earlsfort for a friend. Little did she guess that Dick was playing a quiet game of his own, and that his object was to obtain a footing in the dangerous siren’s house on amicable terms.

‘That is a stroke of policy,’ said Trelawny to Mathilde, as they drove off in the carriage together. ‘Earlsfort is an insufferable bore, but he has got a good deal of influence and power among all classes in this city. If you can get him to smile on the little societies which I suppose you intend to give, you may do exactly what you like without any fear.’

‘Do you think he is likely to become one of us?’

‘Why not? Earlsfort is by no means a *chevalier sans reproche*, though he seems to have tried to impress you with his extreme sanctity. The game is in your own hands, as far as he is concerned, I imagine.’

'I hate him most cordially,' said Mathilde; 'he is always so rude and insulting in his remarks.'

'To-day I am sure you had no cause for complaint—he was quite overpowering in his civilities.'

'Well, we will see. I must do something to get rid of the sort of gloom which hangs over me; and I believe there is nothing warms the blood and thrills through the veins like play.'

'*C'est ça.* We will throw for some high stakes in those, bare, bourgeois-looking rooms of yours. Shall I bring a few men of the right sort in with me to-night?'

'If you like; only choose your friends carefully. We must not scare our Earlsfort at the very beginning.'

'Trust to me—you look bewitching and innocent; and leave all the necessary business arrangements in my hands.'

'*Vous êtes un véritable bijou,*' she said, laughing.

And so *réunions*, on the same plan as those Mathilde had held in London, were inaugurated; and each evening after the Variétés, the Italiens, and other places of fashionable resort, were closed, did Madame d'Aubigné receive her little court. Sometimes the night began with music; and on more than one occasion a celebrated Italian *improvvisatore* had charmed the assembled guests with the soft cadences of his luscious verse; but whatever was the magnet set forth to attract in the earlier part of the evening, it was invariably succeeded by play—play fierce and all-absorbing, such as men with hot temperaments and an ardent thirst for excitement would make it.

Dick Earlsfort had not failed to accept the invitation so flatteringly given; and scarcely an evening passed that he did not present himself as one of Madame d'Aubigné's guests. True, he did not enter as hotly into the pleasures of the green table as did the others, but yet he was not sufficiently backward to make himself remarkable; whilst the homage which he laid at Mathilde's feet made her hourly regret that she had so totally misunderstood Captain Earlsfort, and had not earlier inscribed him on her roll of friends.

Madame d'Aubigné's attentions were, however, considerably divided between Dick Earlsfort and a pale young Frenchman whom Trelawny had brought in one evening, and introduced to her special notice. He was a mere boy, scarcely two-and-twenty, yet he received more smiles and

favours from the fascinating siren than many an older and perchance handsomer man would have done. Strange how frequently it happens that a woman who has passed her girlhood, and is in the full zenith of her power, bestows her caresses and lavishes her thoughts and her time on some young Cupid, whose beard is still but down, and his manners not yet wholly disembarassed of the awkwardness which is the unmistakable stamp of the schoolboy. To educate and train this young mind into something like unison with her own, is probably the object of the worldly beauty. There is doubtless a charm in seeing anything develop itself under your tuition, whether it be for evil or for good.

Thus Madame d'Aubigné was certainly not the only woman of her race who had cast her evil eye on extreme youth ; nor was young Léon de Monceau the only boy who had fallen a victim to the snares of a wily, conquest-loving woman. He did not play highly—she watched him, as yet, with too much care ; but she kept him by her side, and ever and anon whispered those pleasing words in his ear, which to this fledgling, but just escaped from the parent-nest in the forest glades of Lorraine, were bewildering enough.

Earlsfort looked on, a passive spectator. He would fain have held out his hand and snatched the boy from the fire which threatened to destroy him ; but the time had not yet come—his plans for vengeance were not yet ripe.

One evening, when there was a larger assemblage than usual in the vast apartment, and excitement at fever-point swayed every breast, Dick Earlsfort arrived much later than was his wont, and, for the first time since these nightly meetings had begun, he was accompanied by a friend—a strange-looking, little ugly man, of whom it might be observed, as Mlle. Scudéri said of Pelisson, '*Il abusait de la permission qu'ont les hommes d'être laids.*' He introduced him to Mathilde, who smiled on him as Earlsfort's friend, and then troubled her head no farther about him.

'He is a lunatic about play,' said Earlsfort, as he threw himself into a chair beside her, 'so I thought I might venture to bring him.'

'Your friends are always welcome,' she answered, with her sweetest smile. 'By the way, have you heard aught of Sir Henry Wilbraham lately? Is Mrs. Clive still staying in Hampshire?'

'Mrs. Clive is in London, with her mother,' answered Earlsfort. 'And now, perhaps you can tell me where Clive has betaken himself?'

'He is in Scotland, is he not?' she replied, with a slight elevation of her well-arched eyebrows.

'Or in France, *hein?*' and he looked at her searchingly.

'*Que sais-je, moi?* I am not in Mr. Clive's confidence,' and she moved uneasily.

Even now that they had become friends, Dick Earlsfort's questionings did not fail to annoy Mathilde.

'I was not aware that you had quarrelled,' he said, with a little laugh; 'that perhaps accounts for a poor beggar like me coming in for a share of your good favour.'

'Do you think, then, that the human heart has only room for one preference?'

'You ladies allow yourselves a good deal of elasticity, and change your loves with the same frequency as your bonnets; but nevertheless I think there is seldom but one at a time who is really the favourite.'

'Perhaps you arrogate to yourself that position at this moment?' said Mathilde, with a slight toss of her head.

'Not at all,' answered Earlsfort, smiling, as he directed his glance to young De Monceau, who stood leaning against the chimney-piece, watching them with a fierce, angry look in his glaring eyes. 'Young Léon, there, carries off the palm just now. Allow me, however, to express my surprise at the decided *penchant* you evidently show for boys. Did Ralph Baird at all resemble this one?'

Madame d'Aubigné winced, and rising hurriedly from her seat, approached the table devoted to play. Dick Earlsfort did not attempt to follow her, but touching young Léon de Monceau on the shoulder, sought to lead him into conversation. Though it did not suit his own little game to make a vigorous stand in the boy's favour just then, yet he thought some friendly advice, judiciously administered, might not be misplaced. There was something about young Léon which took the fancy of this *blasé* man of the world, and he did not intend him to become one of Madame d'Aubigné's many victims, without any effort being made on his part to avert his fate. So he talked in his genial, chaffy way, and thus sought to win the boy's confidence and regard, and ended by inviting him to come and dine with him on the

following evening, an invitation which was accepted readily, for Léon de Monceau, boy though he was, had seen and heard enough, during his career in Paris, to be aware that to dine with Earlsfort was an honour which was granted but to few. Dick Earlsfort was not rich, and thus could not afford to be over-generous in his invitations; but for all that, no one understood the art of dining better than he did, and the *menu* which was placed before his guests was worthy of Brillat-Savarin himself. Thus he took the pale youth under his especial protection. In his quiet, knowing way he would see if he could not counteract some of Madame d'Aubigné's little schemes. And among the last of the *convives*, well on in the small hours of the morning, Earlsfort and Léon de Monceau left Madame d'Aubigné's drawing-room together. Only Cis Trelawny remained behind. Still inimical to Dick, he lingered to give him and his companion a fair start. Half mad with excitement, trilling out the well-known air, '*Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur*,' he rushed back again from the outer door into the large room, which Mathilde had not yet left, and opening his notebook with triumph in his glance, he displayed *billets de banque* to a considerable amount. Mathilde trembled all over, and there was a stony look of fear in her large eyes. He stopped his song, and asked anxiously for an explanation.

'I have a presentiment,' she said, 'that all is not well. Earlsfort has made one or two biting remarks to-night, nor do I like the searching eyes of that ugly friend of his. You are too rash, my dear Cis; we must have music, and no play, to-morrow night.'

'Bah! you are over-tired,' answered Trelawny, gaily. 'Drink the honey of life as long as it lasts, Madame, and do not think about the absinthe till the bitter draught presents itself.'

And with a pressure of the hand, humming once more the refrain of his ribald song, he left her.

But Mathilde could not divest herself of her fear; and it would have taken a strong dose of hatschis to have brought sleep to the couch which she was now about to seek.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

RAPHAEL.

IT was evening in the Vallée Noire. The moon shone serenely and calmly as it rested on flocculent masses of vapour, which, spreading their diaphanous forms over the sky, looked like the high ridge of some lofty snow-capped mountains. On the limpid water was reflected the pale shimmer. All was silence, mystery, repose, till the nightingale's note rose full of joy and gladness from among the deepening shadows. Seated on the trunk of an old tree, beside the rippling streamlet, were Raphael and the village priest. The boy had stretched out his long, lithe limbs, and seemed to be enjoying to the utmost the calm beauty of this delicious night.

'Tell me, Raphael,' said the good Curé, after a long pause, during which they had both been dreaming over the beauty of the scene, 'tell me of your life—before we knew you. I have often wished to ask you, and it seems to me that this is a very fitting time—we shall have no interruptions; tell me of your griefs and joys, my son; it will do you good to speak of your early youth, your mother, and your home.'

'My mother—ah!' and a dark shadow passed over his brow; 'I see her now, with her calm sad face, praying and longing for her son.'

'Is she dead?' asked the priest in his kind low voice.

'God forbid!' answered Raphael, rousing himself from his indolent position, and looking dreamily and wearily into space. 'Well, you shall have my history, if it will give you any pleasure,' he said, after thinking for a few seconds; 'perhaps it is only fair to little Rose that some one here should know who I am. That I am not of your country

you must long since have discovered, from my habits and my speech. I am an American ; my home is in New York. There I spent my boyhood, and happy enough I was. My gentle mother was all love and tenderness, and though my father was harsh and stern, yet I managed to keep a good deal out of his way ; and as I never wanted for money, I could always find amusement and occupation. Besides, our countrymen are very long-headed and hard-working, and I was kept very steadily at class-work and my books. At last it was decided that I was old enough to go and travel. I had always been fond of solitude, and was sedentary in my habits, dreaming away my time in an ideal existence of my own making. My father was provoked at what he called my "girlishness," and wished to see me business-like, and fit to become a partner in his great commercial counting-house ; so he decided that the only way to wake me up, was to send me to knock about in the world, that I might find my level among my equals. A certain Clive, an Englishman, was selected as my companion, and we started together from New York. I had not been many weeks in the society of this man before I began to distrust him. In whatever large capital we took up our quarters for a time, he seemed to have a circle of unprincipled, scampish acquaintance, and though the various little transactions which were passing between them were kept as quiet as possible whenever I was with them, yet I saw and heard enough to know something of the character of the men with whom I was thrown. I often thought of writing to my father, but he was intemperate and violent, and I had always feared him, so I put off making any communication to him from day to day ; besides, I did not feel very sure what my fate would be, if Clive should once hear that I had been complaining of him. For some months did this state of affairs continue, and my life was no happy one. I felt I was being made the butt and the tool of my tutor and his associates, and on more than one occasion I was compelled, by the force of circumstances, to do things against which every law of principle and honour rebelled.

'After visiting several of the large German cities, in March of last year we found ourselves on the Rhine. You, M. le Curé, down here in this peaceful *vallée*, know but little of the sort of life both men and women lead in some of the principal towns on the banks of that lovely river. After wandering

about the neighbourhood of the Rhine for some weeks, we at last left it and settled at Spa. There my real troubles began. All that had gone before was as child's-play in comparison with the whirlpool of iniquity into which we now plunged, and at which my better self revolted. I do not wish to give myself more credit than I deserve when I say I hated the sort of life I was condemned to lead. Perhaps it was that by nature I was not formed for it. Timid and retiring in disposition, I shrank from facing all this turbulent dissipation, and I looked on with an aching heart when I saw youths, some of them not much older than myself, fresh from their homes, as I was, being led on to their destruction—not unfrequently, too, by the very man who was supposed to be my Mentor and guide.

'A few days after our arrival at Spa, Mr. Clive made the acquaintance of one Madame d'Aubigné, who was the reigning divinity of the place. Her beauty created a great sensation; she was *fêted* by every one, worshipped as a sort of siren, toasted at every feast. She and Clive soon became fast friends. He was handsome and pleasing, and, I suppose, exercised some mysterious power over her, for she speedily banished her other adorers, and Clive was the all-favoured one. Play was the foul fiend which had bound them together, and which seemed to have taken entire possession of them both. They left me comparatively at peace—my money was too useful to them for them to wish me to lose it, and except that Madame d'Aubigné sought to fool me by her fascinations—called me "*Eros aux yeux noirs*," caressed and fondled me, and then by jeers at which I smiled tried to lure me into her train—they did not interfere much with my pursuits. But there was a youth there, one Jules Berthel, a young Frenchman, who had a certain amount of money, I suppose, or he would not have been selected for a victim. Day after day they urged him on to play; and when he was not risking his money at the public tables, he was shut up in a room with Clive, playing *écarté* with him for high stakes, while Madame d'Aubigné used all the wiles of which she was capable to persuade me that it was right he should thus be robbed of his gold.'

'*Tiens, mon Raphael*—can it be true that such things are?'

'Ay, are they, Monsieur le Curé. Happy for you who, in this peaceful valley, have never come in contact with the

wickedness which sweeps some parts of the earth with the violence of a cyclone. But to continue the wretched story : Jules Berthel was engaged to be married to a fair young English girl, who was at first deceived, as others had been, by Madame d'Aubigné's plausibility ; but when, after a little while, she discovered the extent of the liability in which his acquaintance with these people was involving M. Berthel, and she saw the wild, hungry look which his countenance had of late assumed, she grew anxious to stop him, if possible, from travelling further down the road to ruin. She came to me with the tears in her sweet eyes ; but, boy that I was, what could I do to save this man from his fate ?

'Facilis descensus Averni,' said the priest, 'sed revocare gradum.'

'He was not to be reclaimed, at all events—his ruin was inevitable. However, out of pity to the girl, I promised to do what I could, and took an opportunity of expostulating when Clive and Madame d'Aubigné were both together. They had evidently imagined I was but a child, with neither sufficient wits nor knowledge to see through their dark plots ; but at twenty, Monsieur le Curé, a young man begins to know something of the workings of life. Clive's surprise that I should speak to him on this subject was extreme, and his rage very violent. High words rose between us, during which I foolishly threatened him with the police, and told him that, at all hazards, I was resolved to save M. Berthel.

'The stormy interview took place in the gardens adjoining the public rooms, and lasted for about half an hour. After it was over I left them, and went for a short walk, to get rid, if possible, of the disagreeable sensation which a quarrel with my tutor had produced. About two hours later we all three met again at dinner. Mr. Clive was sulky and silent ; Madame d'Aubigné, who had not taken a very active part in the previous altercation, was all smiles and sunshine. By every means in her power she evidently wished to show me that she disapproved of Mr. Clive's behaviour, and that she was my firm and staunch ally. Shall I ever forget that evening ? Oh ! Monsieur le Curé, how often in my day-dreams does that cursed woman's form rise before me !—and I feel inclined to kneel and thank the God of Love for the innocence and simple faith with which he has endowed my own sweet Rose !

‘By every seductive art did this vile woman seek to humbug me. It was a lovely night in early spring, and after dinner we lingered by the open window. Madame d’Aubigné had begged me to take a low footstool at her feet, while she sat toying with my hair, and whispered ever and anon soft words in my ear. Clive, after a time, had sauntered out into the gardens below, and we were left alone. How long we sat there together I know not ; but even now I seem to feel the deliciously drowsy beauty of the scene—to see that woman’s wild flashing eyes, and as in some far-off dream to hear the musical murmur of her words. At last I must have fallen asleep, for I remember no more. When I awoke I was alone in a strange room ; a listless feeling seemed to oppress me, and my limbs were almost powerless. By degrees, however, activity of mind and body began somewhat to return ; and, as it was now broad daylight, I looked round wonderingly ; every object was unfamiliar to me. Nothing reminded me of the little room I had now inhabited for some weeks, in the hotel at Spa. I roused myself and looked out of the window—there too the scene was a new one. Where was I, and what evil had befallen me ? Gradually I began to remember the restless hours I had passed, and a cold shiver of fear came over me. I went to the door ; contrary to my expectations, it was unlocked. I passed down the dirty, creaking wooden staircase with trembling steps, for I heard voices in the room below. Could they be those of Clive and Madame d’Aubigné ? Why had they brought me here, if they had an evil design on me ?—why had they not murdered me as I slept ?

‘I entered the lower room and found three people, but they were strangers, and a scared look came over their honest Belgian faces when they saw me.

“Ah ! Monsieur, we thought you were dying, if not already dead,” said the old woman of the party.

“How did I come here ?—how long have I been here ?” I asked.

“Since the night before last,” she answered. “Why, you must have slept away your malady—how you did sleep, to be sure ! Come, and have some breakfast—you must be starved after that long sleep.”

“How did I come here ?—tell me quickly. And where am I ?”

““Poor young man! he is not quite right,” she said, turning to the others and putting her finger to her head. “You came in a great carriage, with a beautiful lady and an old man, her servant. They said you had been very ill, and asked us to take charge of you for a few days, till they came back from Koln, where they were compelled to go suddenly to see the lady’s child, who had fallen ill of a fever.”

““And they gave you gold, I presume? You would not have believed this tissue of lies without a fee.”

“The good woman looked bewildered; she was too honest to be capable of understanding the extent of this villany. I asked how far I was from Spa, and having ascertained that it was only ten miles off, I felt in my pockets to see if any money had been left me; and finding a few gold pieces, I ordered some breakfast, and then prepared to return to the hotel, to take the advice of one or two English friends I had made there.

“Late in the afternoon I arrived in Spa; standing on the steps of the public rooms was a young artist with whom I had previously made an acquaintance. He was a few years older than myself, but a kindred sympathy in matters of taste had thrown us much together.

““Hold, Ralph, my boy,” he exclaimed, heartily; “who ever expected to see you!”

““Why, did you think I had been murdered?”

““Murdered, no—certainly not. But I thought you had gone off to England with your friends.”

“What do you mean? I asked, wonderingly.

““Why, where on earth have you been, that you know nothing of the fearful tragedy that has happened here, nor of the immediate flight of that precious tutor of yours and his associates? *Qui s’excuse s’accuse*, eh, *mon ami*?”

“Then he told me how poor Jules Berthel, wrought to madness by the vicissitudes of play, had blown his brains out at the public tables on the very evening on which I had been spirited away. Now I understood it all. My presence, when they had discovered that I was aware of their iniquity, was a restraint on these infamous people. I gave my friend Philip Barton an account of what had befallen me, and asked him what I should do next; but he seemed too astonished to be able to connect his ideas.

““Upon my soul,” he said at last, “this is a queer story!

What the deuce did that woman do to you? She must have drugged your wine, my boy."

'I hung my head abashed. It was but too true that, yielding to the persuasions of the temptress, I had been induced to drink several glasses more wine than was my usual habit, totally unconscious of the fact that they had been physicked, in order to make me sleep through the hours which were to be devoted to some farther desperate play with poor Berthel. Why I was carried off to an *auberge* ten miles out of Spa, I know not, unless it were by way of a practical joke on the part of Madame d'Aubigné.

"Well, from many such women the holy saints defend us, is all I have to say," was my friend's only remark. "But you, my dear boy, what are you going to do? I suppose those incarnate fiends have left you without any money?"

'I turned out my pockets, to ascertain the amount of my riches, and in my note-book found a note for 100*l*.

"Hurrah!—corn in Egypt!' cried my cheery companion. "What say you, shall we leave this place, and all its unpleasant reminiscences behind, and go a little tour together?"

'To this I agreed joyfully; and the next morning we started for France. It was arranged that we should go by train to Paris, and from thence make a walking tour, and enjoy at our pleasure some of the loveliest scenery of the country. I did not write to my family, fearing that when my father heard that I was no longer under the charge of Mr. Clive, he would order me to return at once; and I wished to indulge in at least a few weeks of independence. We made the journey to Paris quickly, and without adventure; and we lingered in the capital for a few days, leading the lives of true Bohemians, and husbanding our resources to the utmost. While there, however, Barton received a letter from a friend in Spa, who informed him that old Jerome, the confidential servant of Madame d'Aubigné, had been back to Spa to look for me. If they were on the alert, Paris was no longer a safe resting-place; so, donning the artist's blouse, with our knapsacks strapped to our backs, we started for the hilly districts of La Marche. How, before we reached our destination, poor Barton was taken ill at Châteauroux—how I met you, Monsieur le Curé, in one of my solitary rambles, and you came to see my friend, and tended and nursed him with a father's care, till he was able to return to his own country,

you know full well. Then began the happiest days of my life. Ah ! dear father, you have not been buffeted about in the world as I have been, and can therefore form no idea how I appreciate the peaceful hours of love and calm content which I have enjoyed since I first knew my pretty Rose, and called her my own little faithful wife.'

'But your parents, my son?—have you never written to them? 'This tale of yours perplexes and torments my mind. Had I known previously how superior your social position was to that of La Rose, I would never have fostered or encouraged the love which I saw springing up between you.'

'So much the better, then, that you did not know. But remember, good father, I am an American, and in America we know no caste. I will write home some day, and tell them where I am : but I have continually postponed the time. I cannot bear that this happy dream should roughly pass away.'

'Your real name, then, is not Raphael?'

'My name is Ralph Baird. Raphael was a sort of pet name Barton bestowed on me in a moment of artistic enthusiasm. It has become so endeared to me from hearing it on Rose's lips, that I never wish to go back to the old inharmonious title—hark ! what was that?'

The priest rose from his seat, and listened. The moon was hidden for a time behind a passing cloud, thus deepening the shades of night.

'It sounded like retreating footsteps,' he said ; 'yet it can scarcely be. There is no one likely to be wandering about at this hour. The peasants are all long since in bed, and there is no house nearer than the Folie Blanche, which is quite two miles off.'

'Well, without a doubt there was some one there,' said the younger man ; 'let us take a little turn down the path-way—if it be anyone from the Folie Blanche, they must cross the open meadows, and we shall see them.'

So they sauntered slowly along the dew-covered ground till they reached the rustic bridge, which Rose had crossed on her way to the Folie Blanche not many days before, but not another sound did they hear, not a human form could they see.

'There is evidently no one here, and Rose will think I am lost. Shall we not return?' asked Raphael at last.

'Truly it is getting very late. I am forgetting my early

mass, while I am enjoying the beauty of this lovely night, conversing with you, my son.'

So they retraced their steps, the good priest admonishing Raphael the while, to write at once to his parents. Though a return to his own country might lessen the happiness he was enjoying in the *vallée*, he said, yet it was a duty which he owed to his father and mother, and which he ought to neglect no longer.

The priest and his companion had scarcely reached the moss-covered cottage, in which a light was still shining—for La Rose was sitting over some darning, awaiting her husband's return—when a figure crept out of a hiding-place near the little bridge, and sped swiftly across the fields in the direction of the Folie Blanche. It was Jerome. The moon's light, which was once again shining over the earth, fell full on his features ; they were radiant. Now all these troubles would end—the boy was found ! Early on the following morning he would go to Châteauroux and telegraph to Madame d'Aubigné. Mr. Clive should know nothing whatever of the matter. He would not have *cette chère Mlle. Mathilde* deprived of the pleasure it would be to her to be the first to catch and chastise *ce maudit petit animal*.

'Married too !' muttered Jerome to himself, as he pursued his way. 'Married ! *nom de Pape ! mais on ne tarde pas à vieillir* in this generation. Married ! *ce bébé là !*'





CHAPTER XXXVII.

COUNTER-MEETINGS.

STANDING at a small railway-station in Berri is a small, dilapidated-looking *coupe*, to which is harnessed a meagre, miserable horse—a perfect Rosinante. The driver of this uncouth equipage is a stolid, stupid peasant in a blue blouse, who bears in his hand a rude home-made whip, which he ever and anon brandishes over the head of his sleepy, slow-paced steed. Old Jerome has just got out of this conveyance, and is now on the platform awaiting the arrival of an expected train. In a few minutes the whistle is heard in the distance, and the train comes lumbering into the station. Amid the hubbub and cackle which immediately ensues, Madame d'Aubigné steps out on the platform.

'You received my letter, then, this morning?' she asked. 'And Mr. Clive knows nothing?'

'Not a word—*sacrée parole*; he thinks I have gone to the fair, which takes place to day at Châteauroux.'

'*Bien !*' and Mathilde burst out laughing, for by this time she was outside the little station, and her eye had fallen on the extraordinary conveyance which was to bear her to her destination. *Allons, mon Jerome*, where did you pick up *ce vieux berlingot là ?*

'*J'ai fait mon petit possible*,' answered Jerome, looking somewhat annoyed, 'this country is not rich *en carrosses*, here people walk.'

'Well, we shall not go very fast in that concern, or I am much mistaken. Now, as we jog along, perhaps you will develop your plans. Have you taken a room for me, as I directed?'

'*Si, madame*; everything is well arranged. You will find

all you require, *chez une cousine à* Madame Philippean. She lives about a mile from the Folie Blanche, and rather nearer the place where this *petit* Ralph has been hiding.'

'Well, let us go there at once. I am coquette more or less after the manner of women, and I shall not create half the effects I am counting on, if I make my appearance on the scene travel-stained and tired. So Monsieur Ralph has taken to himself a wife, has he?—*ciel!* but it is amusing. What is she like?'

'Pretty and fresh looking—*mais paysanne au bout des ongles.*'

'So, so, now we have discovered why he remained in seclusion so long. I suppose he thought even American liberality would not overcome a certain amount of annoyance at his *mésalliance*. Never mind; we will have our revenge on the young man, and trot him and his peasant bride before the infuriated father ere many days have come and gone. *Tiens, mon* Jerome, he is a bear, that old American!'

'Has he paid madame a visit?'

'Yes, indeed; and if Cis Trelawny had not come to the rescue, I believe he would have annihilated me forthwith. But never mind him; tell me how is poor, dear Clive. What a joy for him when Ralph Baird is produced without a scratch or wound!'

'Oh! he is well enough in health, is M. Clive, but, madame, so faint-hearted—weak, weak! *Mon Dieu! comme il est faible, cet homme!* How madame can prefer him to the joyous *bon-viveur*, M. Trelawny, poor Jerome is at a loss to comprehend.'

'*Le Bijou?* Ah! well, he is not a bad specimen of humanity as it goes; he has done me one or two good turns lately; but *que voulez-vous, on revient toujours à ses premiers amours.* Poor Oswald, too, he is in difficulties—you would not have me desert him just now?'

'His constancy to madame has not stood much trial. But it is not my affair. I am madame's devoted servant, and will obey her to the last drop of my blood.'

So they chatted familiarly together as they sat side by side, and the dilapidated old *coupé* rolled slowly along among the verdant, rich scenery of Le Berri. Before the door of a pretty cottage they stopped, and Madame Philippean herself came out to meet Mathilde. To judge from the warm embrace, the *empresé* manner, here was another devoted follower

of the all-fascinating d'Aubigné. During the strange, adventurous life Madame Philippean had led while in the service of Mathilde's mother, she had amassed her little riches, and it was the recollection of these stirring days which linked her to Mademoiselle Mathilde, who had always been very kindly and favourably disposed towards her. Thus Mathilde was caressed, and flattered, and made much of. A little repast, worthy of two such *artistes* as Madame Philippean and old Jerome, had been prepared for her, and the dishes which were put on the table in this poor cabin in Le Berri, would not have done discredit to the *chef* at the Frères Provençaux.

Time passed away, and Mathilde at last began to prepare for her visit to Nannette's cottage. She divested herself of the black garments in which she had travelled, and white being admitted by her in her peculiar mourning for her husband, she dressed herself in a white costume of the last Paris fashion.

Her eyes sparkling with joy at having found the boy whose loss had caused them so much anxiety, her beauty freshened and heightened in its rich colouring by her drive in the sweet, balmy spring air, she started alone down a little pathway which she was told would, after a walk of some ten minutes, take her to Nannette's cottage. She reached the felled tree which served as a rustic bridge, by a road which joined that leading to the Folie Blanche at this spot. Seated at the farther end of the bridge, she saw Ralph and his pretty Rose. For a few minutes Mathilde stood and watched them; there was something in the scene altogether which entranced her. It was so far removed from the turbulent, excited life she was in the habit of leading, that for a moment she felt more than half inclined to commend Ralph for preferring this peaceful, calm sort of existence.

Rose was the first to perceive her, and with an exclamation, 'Oh! Raphael, *la belle dame!*' she sprang to her feet.

Ralph looked up from a piece of wood he was engaged in carving—part of an ornament for the new boat. His usually pale features grew livid, his large eyes flashed.

'Madame d'Aubigné, why are you here?' he asked in English; while Rose, terror-stricken at his altered countenance, clung to him, half fainting with fear.

'My presence does not seem to inspire you with much

pleasure,' she said, in her sweetest tones. 'I should have thought that the sight of a friend in this out-of-the-way place would have produced a more agreeable sensation.'

'A friend! Have you proved yourself a friend to me?' he asked her, almost fiercely.

'My dear Ralph, pray explain in what I have been your foe. Is it not rather you who have been my enemy, and that of poor Mr. Clive, who, while you have been hiding for your own gratification, has been hunted all over the world by your relations, accused of having murdered you?'

'His treatment of me was a moral murder,' said Ralph, doggedly.

'My dear boy, this talk is foolish and unworthy of you. Tell me, who is this pretty child with whom you seem to be idling away the sunshiny hours of life?'

Rose was still clinging to him, half-crying with fright; but he shook her off and stood before her, as though he would defend her.

'No, Madame d'Aubigné, you shall not contaminate my Rose. You have brought your vile arts to bear upon me, and have sought to poison my young life by your machinations, and because you failed to make me grovel in the depths of infamy into which you and Clive had sunk, you had me conveyed away among strangers, not caring whether I lived or died. Surely you have done enough, without persecuting me farther with your villainies.'

Madame d'Aubigné laughed—a ringing laugh, which echoed through those quiet, peaceful glades.

'My dear Ralph, why, you have learnt melodrama in this sylvan retreat! You never used to be so verbose and declamatory.'

'Perhaps not. You had a sort of influence over me once; but I have freed myself from the shackles which bound me, and I do not intend to be re-fettered.'

'You seem to have forged other links,' she said, with a sneer; and dross generally weighs heavier than gold, *mon ami*.'

The boy's eyes dilated, and his whole countenance was worked up to a wild look of passion; however, he did not answer her, but turning to his wife, he said gently,

'Rose, go back to the cottage and wait for me there—this is no scene for you, my child.'

‘The withering sarcasm of that last remark is most amusing,’ sneered Madame d’Aubigné. ‘Pray may I ask what relations exist between you and that girl?’

‘She is my wife.’

‘Your wife! oh! age of adolescence, how rich thou art in virtue! And so you have settled down here as a respectable married man. I wish you joy, my dear Ralph, of a very dull life.’

‘That is my affair, Madame,’ he answered coldly; ‘pray may I ask why you sought me out, and what you require of me?’

‘You mean you wish all intercourse between us in future to be of a business nature—be it so. I require you to come with me at once to Mr. Clive, who is at this moment in hiding at a house not far from here, because your father is pursuing him remorselessly, and threatening him with the utmost rigour of the law for being accessory to your supposed death.’

‘My father! Is he then in France?’

‘I do not know if he is in France, but he was in London not long since, and treated me to a very stormy interview. I will give you credit for having more pleasing manners than your father has, *mon* Ralph. *Tiens*, he is a perfect tiger.’

‘How wrong I have been in not writing home!’ murmured Ralph, half to himself.

‘I should think you have been; but since you recognise your fault, perhaps you will seek to make amends for it by coming with me at once to Mr. Clive.’

The boy hesitated for a few seconds; he did not know into what new snare she might be seeking to inveigle him.

‘Where is Mr. Clive staying?’ he asked.

‘At the Folie Blanche.’

Then he recollected what Rose had told him about the sick stranger; there might then, after all, be some truth in Mathilde’s tale.

‘I will come with you,’ he said; ‘but I must first let my wife know that I may be absent for some time. Perhaps you will rest on the bridge for a few seconds.’

He sped back like a young hart to the cottage. Rose was standing on the threshold looking for him, but instead of speaking to, or caressing her as was his wont, he tore a page from his note-book and wrote hastily,

‘A la Folie Blanche, with Madame d’Aubigné and

Clive ; if I have not returned within an hour, will you come or send ?’

‘Take this to the good Curé at once, *ma mie*,’ he said, addressing his wife.

She looked at the paper.

‘Oh, Raphael, is there any danger ?’

‘None, *chère enfant*, but it is important that the Curé should receive this note ; he will understand what it means.’

Then giving her a hasty embrace, he ran once more quickly down the river-path and rejoined Mathilde. They immediately began their walk across the meadows to the Folie Blanche. Ralph was wholly distrustful of his companion, and feeling himself to be totally incapable of successfully coping with her, was thoroughly on the defensive, and answered her numerous cunningly-devised questions with querulous monosyllables, which to any one but Mathilde would have been very repellent and crushing. As it was, the conversation did not flow easily, and every now and then there were pauses of some minutes’ duration. During one of these lulls Mathilde stopped, and laying her hand on Ralph’s arm, said,

‘What was that ? I thought I heard a moan.’

Ralph smiled.

‘Has the *lever du rideau* begun already ?’ he asked ; ‘why we have not even reached the house yet !’

‘I am not acting, on my word,’ she answered. ‘Hark ! there it is again—shall we not see what it is ? If it be but a cow or a sheep in distress, surely it were only humane to succour it.’

‘Since when has Madame d’Aubigné learnt to have so great a regard for the feelings of others ?’ asked Ralph, with a sneer. ‘But, since you wish it, let us go to the rescue. Wait a moment, till we hear the sound again—there, it comes from that knoll of trees.’

They crossed quickly over to the place from whence issued a sort of half cry, half wail of pain. Lying under the trees, rolled up almost into a ball, was the form of a man. Ralph went forward and raised his head, which had sunk on his breast, as though in mortal agony.

A cry burst from Mathilde’s lips—a thrilling shriek ; then she knelt down and threw her arms round the crouching body.

‘Oswald!—my dear Oswald, what has happened? Speak to me, if it be but one word!’

His face was white as marble, his lips blue, and his eyes were sunk deep into his head—but he opened them and looked at her. Then he made an effort to speak, but the blood trickled slowly from his mouth.

‘Not a word,’ said Mathilde, stopping him with a gesture.

In the face of this vital danger threatening the man she loved, her presence of mind had returned, and she was all calmness and fortitude now.

‘Go to the house, Ralph, and bring assistance. I will stay here till your return.’

With a sort of spasm, Clive raised himself from the crouching position in which Mathilde supported him, and looked earnestly and fixedly on the boy.

‘Ralph!’ he said, speaking with difficulty. ‘Oh! my God, why did he come so late?’ Then he dropped back with his head on Mathilde’s shoulder, in a sort of faint which closely resembled death.

Thus keeping watch over Clive, in the rapidly gathering twilight,

‘The dreadful post
Of observation, darker every hour,’

did Ralph leave Madame d’Aubigné, while he went to the Folie Blanche, still some half a mile off. The same primitive-looking cabriolet which had met Mathilde at the station had just arrived with Madame Philippean and old Jerome. Ralph dashed unceremoniously into the kitchen.

‘*Sacrée parele!* here is M. Ralph! Why, it warms one’s blood to have found you, and above ground too,’ cried Jerome, as he slapped him familiarly on the back.

‘*Dame!* and to think of our Rose’s husband being a young *milor* in disguise!’ shrieked Madame Philippean, in her harsh, shrill voice. ‘But, *tiens*, you do not seem overjoyed yourself, *mon ami*? If he had met the devil himself walking about our meadows disguised as the Holy Pontiff, he could not look more scared.’

Mr. Clive is dying. Come both of you quickly,’ said Ralph at last, when he had recovered the breath of which his long run had nearly robbed him.

‘Dying!—M. Clive! Are we to have a tragedy instead

of a comedy, after all?' asked Jerome. 'How is he dying?—what has killed him?'

'I know not—but come directly. Madame d'Aubigné is with him. We found him lying under a tree, and near him a large pool of blood.'

'*Ciel!*' cried Jerome, 'why did I leave him for one little half-hour? In solitude he always quarrels with himself.'

But Jerome was an old soldier, and though, Frenchman-like, he could not hold his tongue, yet he busied himself the while with preparations for bringing home the wounded man; and in a few minutes the trio set out on their mournful journey. Ralph, however, was the most impressed by what had happened—he was young, and unused to scenes like this; keenly alive, too, to the miserable mental condition of the man whose life seemed to be hanging by a thread. His companions were more hardened. During lives fraught with intrigue and trickery of every kind, they had seen not a few dismal endings; and they speculated on the whys and the wherefores, and discussed Clive and his affairs, in all their bearings, during their walk, in a way which made young Ralph shudder.

At last they reached the spot, and Jerome having examined Clive's wound, they put him on a sort of litter they had prepared for him, and Ralph and Jerome carried him back to the Folie Blanche. To a certain degree he had recovered consciousness, and had smiled once or twice on Mathilde; but an intense feeling of discomfort seemed to come over him whenever his eye fell on Ralph. Arrived at the door of the farm-house, they met the Curé, who had come to look after Ralph. He offered to go off at once to Châteauroux, and telegraph to Paris for a surgeon, as Mathilde strongly doubted the capabilities of the country *chirurgien*—a sort of half-barber, half-dentist—with whom the rural population had to be satisfied. She was probably right when she said she believed Jerome himself to be a greater proficient than was this man.

When Jerome had made use of all the surgical knowledge he possessed, and had tended Mr. Clive to the best of his power, he beckoned Madame d'Aubigné into another room, and closed the door.

'The meaning of this, madame?—do you know?' he asked, mysteriously.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said. 'I can tell you nothing, save that poor Oswald is desperately wounded.' And she sat down by a little wooden table and hid her face.

Jerome put his hand on her shoulder.

'Do you believe in suicide, madame?'

'He has threatened it so often, what else can I imagine? Oh! Jerome, I wish you had not left him to come to me! He became low-spirited and depressed, poor dear!'

'So I thought at first, madame; but now I am of another opinion. He did not give himself the wound.'

'How?—Do you think he has been murdered?—By whom?'

'How should I know?' answered Jerome, shrugging his shoulders.

'Have you questioned the people about? Has anyone been seen lurking in the neighbourhood? The country is not like a town. No one can come and go without observation.'

'I asked the *bonne*, and she said that about two hours before our return, a monsieur came and asked for M. Clive. She said she had never heard of the name; but he did not seem satisfied, and expressed his determination to call again when *les maîtres* should have returned.'

'And this stranger was?'

'*Dieu!* madame how should I know?'

'Poor Oswald! poor Oswald!' moaned Mathilde; 'all my efforts to save him seem to have proved useless.'

'True, madame. Fate is stronger than you.'

'Away with your philosophy just now! I wish the Paris doctor would come. Let me know at once when he arrives. I will go and sit with Mr. Clive. Perhaps he may revive a little, and give us the key to this mystery.'

But vainly did Mathilde watch beside him through the long hours of the silent night. He never spoke, but lay moaning in feverish pain. In the morning the Paris surgeon came, but his visit brought no hope. The wound he feared was mortal, and though the sufferer might live for days, yet hemorrhage would probably eventually set in, and carry him off in a few hours.

'And a good thing when it did happen,' was the verdict of both Madame Philippean and old Jerome, with neither of whom was Clive a favourite. He was too chicken-hearted

and timorous to suit them, and what Mlle. Mathilde could see in him to make such a fuss about, it was quite beyond them to discover.

Towards the evening of the following day, Mathilde's long watch was somewhat rewarded, for Clive seemed thoroughly sensible of her presence, and softly whispered her name. Then she began to talk to him in her gentle, soft way, and after a while told him that young Ralph was found. Then the same shudder, the same fixed look came over him.

'What is it?—are you not glad that he is found?'

'Too late!—he muttered—'his father.'

'What of his father? He has not been here?'

'Yes—we fought with pistols, in the wood ;' he uttered his words with difficulty, and then there was a long silence.

Mathilde was combating with herself going over the past in all its details, and the retrospection was no pleasing one. It was all her fault, she thought; but for her desire to play an important part, all might yet have been well. Oh, how she regretted that Oswald had not been earlier made aware of the boy's whereabouts! Once again Clive moved restlessly, and the bloodless lips parted. She leant over him, to catch the almost inaudible sound.

'Georgie—Mathilde—I must see Georgie ere I die.'

Madame d'Aubigné fell back almost powerless in her chair. Notwithstanding all her planning, plotting, scheming for him, Georgie was still the first in his thoughts, the best-beloved in his heart.





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FROM GAY TO GRAVE.

GEORGIE CLIVE is standing by the window in Lady Ida's drawing-room, playing in her careless, jaunty way with the tassel of the blind. Sir Henry Wilbraham is walking up and down the room, with a very pre-occupied look on his face. Whatever may be the subject under discussion, he evidently does not regard it in the same light as does Georgie. There has been a silence of two or three minutes, while the Baronet seems to have been lost in thought.

'You are very disagreeable,' exclaimed Georgie, at last, as she turned from the window and looked at him; 'you profess to be my friend, or even something more—only one is not allowed to mention the fact, and yet you persistently refuse every request I make of you. Is being bearish part of your religious code, a sort of penance you think it right to inflict, by way of punishment?'

'My dear Georgie, how can you rattle on in that wild way? I have by no means refused my consent, only even you must allow that the subject requires some little consideration.'

'Nonsense! thinking is a mistake, *Enrico mio*, as you ought to have found out. You have marred your life by giving way to too much of it. I tell you, Glory is irretrievably in love with Mr. Dillon, and that if you do not give in and let them be married, I should not wonder if they were to follow my example and take the law in their own hands.'

'Glory would never do such a thing. She is far too sensible of the unhappiness which invariably follows a run-away marriage.'

Georgie laughed.

'Do you think Oswald and I would have had no jars if we had been married in due form, with a bevy of bridesmaids and a shower of bouquets?'

'No, Mrs. Clive—of course I do not think the brides-

maids and the bouquets have anything to do with it, excepting that they would never have existed. No sensible relations would ever have countenanced your marriage with that man.'

'Poor old Oswald!' said Georgie, musingly. 'I don't believe, after all, that he is as bad as you make him out to be. I wish I had not quarrelled with him. When do you think he is likely to come back?'

'That is entirely beyond me to say.'

'Now that that wretch of a woman has gone to Paris, we might be very jolly and happy if he would only come.'

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders as he thought of Dick Earlsfort's letter, and the insinuation that the distance which separated Clive and Mathilde was probably no wide one.

'But never mind Oswald just now,' continued Georgie. 'Are you going to let us have a wedding between Glory and Mr. Dillon? I do so want something to get excited about.'

'Very second-hand sort of excitement, that of looking on at other people's happiness,' said Sir Henry, laughing. 'You have told me a great deal about Glory's lovelorn condition; but how do you know that the gentleman is in the same plight?'

'Oh, the loves of Leander, Troilus, Pyramus, and Romeo sink into insignificance before the ardent devotion for Glory which has sprung up in Mr. Dillon's breast.'

Sir Henry could not forego a good, hearty laugh at the idea of honest, steady-going old Dillon being compared to these love-sick heroes of the past.

'Has he been confiding the miseries incidental to his desperate condition to you, that you are so *au fait* as to his state?' he asked her.

'Of course I know all about it. He is afraid to speak to you—you look so phlegmatic and stolid, and I am sure he is quite right. You have got no more heart than a turnip;' and she tossed her head pettishly.

'How much better it would be for me were it so,' answered Sir Henry, gravely; 'but to talk more seriously of this matter, I had always fancied Glory would have married my old friend Dick Earlsfort.'

'Then you fancied wrong, as people generally do on these subjects. Captain Earlsfort is very well in his way, but would not suit Glory, whereas she and Mr. Dillon will grub away with their chinks and their paints in a sort of Heaven of their own making, till they will fancy themselves the greatest painters of the day. And, after all, if you are a

swell in your own opinion, it does not much matter what the world says or thinks of you, you are sure to go on distending and puffing with your own greatness, like the toad in the fable.'

'Till some fine day there is a general smash, which, no doubt, will take place in this instance, for I do not see where the money is to come from.'

'Work, my dear Sir Henry, work is the one idea of these two persevering people. They expect to realise millions together, though probably if separated they would pine and die. Besides, Glory is not a pauper, so even if their castles be of cards, the workhouse is not imminent. Now come, I have nearly talked myself hoarse in their cause, surely you are not going to play the hard-hearted guardian any longer. Remember, too, I never let a subject drop when I have taken it up, so you will have no peace in your life till you consent.'

'Well, I will go and see Dillon, and hear what he has to say, though if he be in the crazy state of those young lovers you mentioned just now, I shall not have a very pleasant interview.'

'That is right ; you are not such a bad old Henry, after all. So we shall have a wedding, and I can look after Glory's trousseau, which will compensate somewhat for never having had one of my own.'

And Sir Henry fulfilled his promise, and went to see Mr. Dillon. He was not at all satisfied about this being what the world would call a good marriage for Glory, but she seemed very bent upon it ; and when he thought over her peculiar temperament, he did not know that he had any right to contradict her wishes, especially as, save in the matter of money, he could raise no vital objection to Mr. Dillon, and Glory's fortune was more than enough for them both. Mr. Dillon, too, had for some time past ceased to live in the two miserable attics where he had given poor old Sternheim a home. He had got one or two good sums for his pictures, and since he had become a daily visitor at Madame d'Aubigné's, and had been thrown altogether into more luxury-loving society, he no longer contented himself with the meanness and poverty of his old quarters, and in the present large, airy *atelier* there was nothing to shock Sir Henry Wilbraham's refined and cultivated tastes. True, Dillon was an artist—a denizen of the Bohemian world ; but Glory's tendencies had of late strongly developed themselves in that direction, and it might, perhaps, only contribute to her unhappiness, if

she were compelled to forego them. Notwithstanding Georgie's charge of hard-heartedness, Sir Henry was very easily persuaded, and, in fact, found it rather difficult to say no, when he was as vigorously assailed as he was in this instance. So the wedding was to take place forthwith, and the greatest difficulty Sir Henry had to overcome was that of writing a letter to Dick, telling him that all his hopes of one day winning Glory had been dashed. Lady Wilbraham, though, was by no means pleased. Her staunch old Conservative principles were rudely shaken by the alliance of one of her race with a poor artist, without either pedigree or name; but, as Georgie said,

'The old lady's wrath will have to expend itself down in the solitude of Brinck Hall, for no one is going to attend to her prejudices.'

'Lady Wilbraham has been very kind to me,' was Glory's answer to Mrs. Clive's off-hand remark, 'and it is a great check to my happiness when I think that she disapproves of my marriage.'

'Pooh!—nonsense; the old dame is so strongly impregnated with Toryism, that she thinks it would involve her pet opinions if she were to give in too readily to this somewhat democratic proceeding of yours. She will come round, never fear. Old ladies always do at last, because, as no one takes the least notice of their vagaries, they find sitting on a high-backed chair, looking stern, very uncomfortable to themselves, and unproductive of effect on other people.'

Glory shook her head; she did not go with Mrs. Clive in her somewhat undutiful theory.

'It is true, upon my word,' continued Georgie. 'Mamma made a fuss when I married, but she got over it; and as for Aunt Boyer, why, she did her utmost to become an iceberg. And yet only yesterday she told me, that when I had made up my quarrel with Oswald, she would allow us £200 a year; and if I behave myself, as she cautiously suggested, I am to have all her money when she dies.'

'I suppose, like Lady Macbeth, she thinks "what's done cannot be undone."'

'Just so, and thereby shows her wisdom. And depend on it, as soon as your Gordian knot is tied, the old lady at Brinck Hall, who always looks as if she were trying to play the part of the mother of the Gracchi, will unfreeze to you as much as is possible to her frosty nature. Now the thing

in the programme of which I disapprove is that plan you have got in your head about living in the suburbs. According to my ideas, there is only one thing worse than living in the country, and that is having to vegetate on the outskirts of a large town.'

'But you forget, my dear Georgie, that henceforth I shall belong to the working-classes. We shall have more light, more sun, more quietude out there than we could have in London, yet we shall have easy access to the metropolis, when we want to sell our pictures, or to rub the rust off our intellects by mixing a little in the art societies of the day.'

'A very practical view of things, I make no doubt,' answered Georgie, laughing; 'and it is very certain you will want the polish of outside influences occasionally, or you will get so very Darby and Joan in your tendencies, that the only pictures to which you will treat the public will be variations on the "Flitch of Bacon." However much you may mix with your fellows, I expect you will get very prosy and Dutch in your subjects; for married life being an antidote to romance, you are sure to take to detail for want of incident.'

'Become pottering, I suppose you mean,' laughed Glory; 'though, allow me to observe, I do not think you have lost any of your dash.'

'Ah! my dear child, but then I never allowed matrimony to shackle me. To have my own way has ever been the first object of my life; but you will hob and nob with old Dillon, and mix up your ideas with his, till you will end by having no free-will at all.'

'So much the better,' said Glory; 'it will save one the trouble of exercising private judgment. To me one of the greatest charms in married life is to have some one reliable, on whom you can thoroughly lean for support and guidance.'

At this moment Sir Henry Wilbraham entered the room, and Georgie turned to him.

'What a pity you did not come a moment sooner!—you would have heard Glory's pretty lips enunciating the sweetest and most womanly theory on the subject of wedded happiness. She is worthy of her Hampshire training. When Oswald returns, I shall come to you for a lesson, Glory.'

There was a dark cloud hanging over Sir Henry's face, and he made no answer to Georgie's badinage, but sat down in an arm-chair, and did not speak.

'Well, you are civil,' continued Georgie, 'not having

seen me since yesterday ! I think you might at least have wished me a good morning.'

'I have had a letter from Paris,' he said, still looking very grave.

'Oh ! from Captain Earlsfort, I suppose. Is he going to cut his throat because Glory is to marry Mr. Dillon ?'

'It is from Earlsfort, but he does not even mention Glory's name.'

'Then Oswald has really gone off with Madame d'Aubigné ?' and the bright colour fled from Georgie's cheeks.

The recollection of the love which she believed her husband to feel for another woman was the only thought that ever seemed to sober her.

'Your husband is very ill, my poor child—would you not like to go and see him ?'

Georgie looked very bewildered and wild, and clutched the back of a chair, as though she had suddenly grown faint and dizzy.

'What ?' she said—'I do not understand. Oswald is in Scotland. What does Captain Earlsfort know about him in Paris ?'

Sir Henry shook his head.

'He is in France, Georgie, and has met with an accident.'

'Is he alive ?' she asked, in a low voice.

'Yes, or I should not have suggested that you should go to him.'

'Then take me to him quickly. Oh ! Oswald—my love—my husband—why did I leave you ?'

But the sudden shock, in the midst of her gay, bright talk had been too much for her nervous system, and had not Sir Henry caught her in his arms, she would have fallen to the ground in a dead faint. He laid her on the sofa, and sent for Lady Ida, who came from a laboratory which she had lately established in the lower regions of the house, her fingers stained and blackened by the various chemical experiments on which she had been engaged. Crucibles and braziers were Lady Ida's last playthings. So crazy had she become about this, to her, new branch of science, that the dangerous contents of some of the little blue bottles ranged on the laboratory shelves would probably have been brought to revive Georgie, if Sir Henry had not most determinedly set his face against their use.

For some long time did Georgie lie there, looking so

white and still, and unlike her joyous, merry self, that Sir Henry, as he watched her, almost cursed himself that he had been the bearer of news which could so utterly overwhelm and crush her. Of late Georgie had been even more excitable and fractious than was her wont ; she was evidently craving for Oswald's return, though she would not own it, and the extreme irritability which she displayed at times told only too plainly of the inward rankle of annoyance which her pride forbade her to shape into words. Now the tidings of this accident had come, and her cup of regrets was filled to overflowing. Poor child ! Sir Henry, in his love for her, had spared her the entire truth, and had carefully avoided giving her the details contained in Earlsfort's letter. How John Baird had tracked Clive down into the solitudes of Le Berri, and had stained one of the fairest provinces of France with his blood, Georgie was not to know.

At last poor Georgie's faintness yielded to Glory's gentle tending, and she opened her eyes and pushed back her golden curls, as one would do who was returning from some far-off dream ; then she sat up and looked at them.

'Where am I?' she asked. 'What has happened? Ah ! I remember—Oswald—poor Oswald is ill, and I am not near him. Take me to him, Henry—now, at once !' and she held out her hands to Sir Henry, and looked at him with tears in the once merry, joyous eyes, now saddened and sobered by grief.

Sir Henry hesitated ; he felt that, after all that had passed, it was scarcely fitting that he should be Georgie's escort to her husband's death-bed. With a hopeless sort of look on his face, he turned to Lady Ida. Would she accompany her child ? She began to whine, as she had done when Georgie left her alone in the hotel in Paris.

'No, indeed I cannot undertake that long journey to look after Oswald. Why did he behave so ill and take himself off? I am sure I do not see why Georgie should go after him. I dare say he will be better in a few days. It is only a feint to get her to come to him, and she will be ill herself if she attends to his request.'

'I am much more likely to be ill if I stay here,' said Georgie, springing from the sofa. 'If no one will accompany me I shall go alone, for I intend to start, and at once too. I suppose you all of you understand what that means ?'

Sir Henry took her hand.

'You shall go, my dear Georgie,' he said, 'and by the next boat, too. I will find you an escort.'

'I am in no mood to enter into all these little delicate intricacies,' she answered with a toss; 'I want to go to Oswald, and I am sure I do not care who goes with me, as long as I get there. If you won't come, I dare say some one else will, so I shall go and get ready for my journey;' and with this she went out of the room.

Sir Henry felt rather non-plussed. That Georgie would go alone, unless a companion were found for her, he felt sure. In his trouble he thought of Lady Bowyer; she was far more rational and reasonable than Lady Ida, and would at once feel that it was Georgie's duty to go to her husband. She might then, perhaps, be induced to accompany her. So promising Lady Ida that he would return in half-an-hour, he started off to see what could be done.

In the hall he met Mrs. Baird; she was, if possible, more untidy and eccentric than usual in her dress, while her countenance wore such an excited wild look, that the people who had passed her in the streets must have taken her for a maniac.

'Oh, Sir Henry, is this all true?' she asked when she saw him.

'Heaven be praised that I met you before you saw Mrs. Clive!' said the Baronet; 'she must not know the details of what has happened. She thinks her husband has met with an accident.'

'Then there is no mistake about it—John Baird has murdered that wretched Clive?'

'Hush! for mercy's sake don't speak so loud!—come in here!' and he led her into the dining-room. 'Clive is not dead, and while there is life there is hope; besides, it was a duel, not a murder—Clive had an equal chance of killing Mr. Baird.'

'Call it by what name you like,' she said, 'it is the same crime before God!'

'May I ask from whom you have received your information?' asked Sir Henry.

'From John Baird himself. It seems he took ship at Bordeaux for Ireland, from whence he hoped to reach America without difficulty. Before starting he wrote me a line, telling me what had happened. It is a miserable

business,' she continued; 'it was surely bad enough to have lost the boy, but to think that John Baird should do a thing like this, is almost past belief. What will his poor wife say,—it will kill her if ever she knows the truth.'

'Let us hope that things will turn out better than we expect,' said Sir Henry. 'Mrs. Clive is resolved to go to her husband by the mail to-night, and I am most anxious to find a judicious companion for her, as, from what Captain Earlsfort says in his letter to me, I suspect Madame d'Aubigné, is lurking about near Clive.'

'I will go with her,' said the widow readily. 'Georgie and I have not always agreed on many little points, but I have no ill-will to her, and commend her wish to be with her husband. Trust me too for shielding her from that woman d'Aubigné. She outwitted me once, but she will find me more than a match for her if she should attempt to interfere with Mrs. Clive.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Baird. You do not know what a relief this is to my mind,' said the Baronet with enthusiasm; 'Georgie will be in perfect safety under your charge, and I will go and see if I cannot secure the services of a very sharp active man to look after you on the journey. He has been a good deal on the continent, and understands all the minutiae of travelling. Should any disagreeables arise after you reach the Folie Blanche, as I believe the house is called in which Clive is lying, it would be as well to telegraph to Captain Earlsfort, whose address in Paris I will give you.'

'And you, Sir Henry—shall you remain in England?'

'Well, no. I think I shall probably go to Paris to-morrow, but for various reasons it is not desirable that I should travel with Mrs. Clive.'

Thus they parted, to make the arrangements necessary for the journey; and a few hours later Georgie, accompanied by Mrs. Baird and attended by the courier Sir Henry had succeeded in finding, started on her melancholy journey into Berri. Poor Georgie! she would have laughed anyone to scorn a day or two before, if they had told her how gladly she would hail Mrs. Baird as a travelling companion; or how, in her utter misery and dejection of spirits, she would trustfully and gratefully rely on Mrs. Baird's strong-mindedness, and find support and comfort from her determination of character and ready off-hand brisk manner.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

SORROW.

IT was a dark night, and the rain was pouring down in torrents, when a travelling-carriage was driven with a good deal of clatter into the courtyard in front of the Folie Blanche. Madame Philippean and old Jerome, hearing the noise occasioned by this somewhat unexpected arrival, were immediately on the alert, and were already at the outer door in time to assist Mrs. Baird and Georgie to alight. Georgie looked very pale and worn from her rapid anxious journey, and she clung tightly to Mrs. Baird's arm, with a startled, half-frightened look in her pretty eyes, as she gazed round on the dimly-lighted large stone hall into which the lower rooms of the Folie Blanche opened.

Jerome whistled softly to himself when he recognised the new-comers; then he thought he would go and warn Mathilde. Now that the wife had come she would probably prefer to remain in seclusion, and thus avoid an unpleasant meeting. But it was too late; at the top of a short staircase, at the farther end of the hall stood Mathilde, surveying the group with a lighted candle in her hand. She was dressed in a long flowing grey robe, and her rich auburn hair, released from its coils, fell over her shoulders in redundant beauty. She was deadly pale, long watching and bitter sorrow had done their work, all the bright colouring was gone, but the stony whiteness of her face seemed but to make the large eyes look darker and more dreamy than ever.

Georgie gave a little scream when she saw her, and clutched Mrs. Baird's arm with almost a convulsive grasp.

'That woman here!' she cried. Then, making a wonderful effort over herself, she dashed forward to the foot of the staircase. 'Oswald!—my husband, Madame d'Aubigné—where is he?'

Mathilde looked at her for a moment with a cold, searching expression ; then she said, slowly—

‘Your husband is dead !’

Georgie’s bitter wail of pain, her look of agony as she clung to the railings of the staircase for support, were a sort of balm to Mathilde. It seemed to relieve her of some of her own sorrow to know that another was weighed down to the very earth by a grief as heavy as hers, and there was something of triumph in the glance she turned on Georgie as she remembered that the last breath of the beloved one had passed on her cheek, and that she had closed his eyes while the wife was far away.

‘Not dead !’ cried Georgie—‘do not say that he is dead ! Oh ! Madame d’Aubigné, do not be so cruel and torture me thus ! What evil have I ever done to you that you should come between us and rob me of my husband ? Take me to him ! Oh ! Oswald, my poor Oswald !—and we parted in anger !’

Mathilde did not relax from her appearance of stony calmness.

‘You left him, I think,’ she said, slowly ; ‘and if I had not chanced to be here, he would have died like a dog in a ditch, with no loving hand to tend or solace his last hours.’

Georgie sobbed, and bent her head in anguish, almost to the ground.

‘A dereliction of duty generally brings its own punishment, Mrs. Clive,’ continued Mathilde, grandly, as she stood over the weeping girl, looking majestic in her cold, wicked triumph.

But Mrs. Baird now advanced. Hidden behind the others, Mathilde had not previously recognised her in her numerous travelling wraps—she had taken her for a maid in attendance on Georgie ; and a change came over her countenance as she found herself face to face with the widow.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Baird, fiercely, ‘she is not without protection, poor child ! You need not think that she will be trodden quite into the earth by your cold, heartless sneers. A nice person you are to speak of duty ! Has not your own life been one tissue of hypocrisy and lies ? Look up, look up, my poor Georgie !’ and she raised her in her arms, to weep out her poor little stricken heart on her bony, faithful shoulder.

Even Madame Philippean was touched. This, then, was the Georgie whose name Clive had so frequently whispered during the last few hours of his life, and for whom, as long as he had sufficient strength, he had turned to look whenever the least sound fell on his ear. False even to him, Mathilde had told him she was sent for, and he firmly believed that she would come to soothe his last hours with her presence and her forgiveness; thus he was ever watching, praying that she might not arrive too late. But not one word did Mathilde send; and but for Captain Earlsfort's letter to Sir Henry, Georgie would have remained in total ignorance of her husband's state.

On the ground-floor of the house there was a large, quaint-looking bedroom, but rarely used. The bed, with its heavy, old-fashioned hangings, looked as if it had stood there for centuries; and the whole furniture of the room was grotesque in form, and dilapidated from long disuse. Into this drear abode did they take poor Georgie, still weeping hysterically, and clinging to Mrs. Baird.

They lighted up some logs, and tried to make a cheerful fire; but the place still looked so weird-like in its discomfort and its antiquity, that even Mrs. Baird, regardless as she usually was of outer influences, was unhinged and awed, and wished that the poor child under her charge had never come on this melancholy, useless journey.

During the entire night, Georgie did not sleep, but lay sobbing and muttering to herself, in a sort of half-delirious state. She went over in detail all her last interview with her husband, and begged him to take her back to be his true and loving wife, in such piteous, heart-rending accents that few could have watched beside her without shedding a tear. At last the morning dawned; for some time past the rain had ceased to fall, and the glorious spring sun now shone over the earth, and dried up the vaporous moisture, bringing, as it ever does with its warmth and beauty, hope and gladness to the heart of man. Mrs. Baird hailed it with joy, and opened the little casement window to look out on the fair scene which lay around. Georgie had grown quieter towards the morning, and by the time busy life had commenced once more, and the peasants were already resting from their labours to partake of their morning meal, she was in a sound sleep. Then Mrs. Baird thought she would reconnoitre a little; and

after exchanging a few words of greeting with Madame Philippean, who was, as usual, busy over her culinary duties in the kitchen, she went out to refresh herself in the soft balmy air. As she stood leaning against the gate, thinking over the vicissitudes of life, and the agitating events of the last few hours, Ralph came slowly across the meadows. He did not yet know that Clive was dead, for he had breathed his last but a short time before Georgie's arrival; yet Ralph looked very unhappy and dejected. The thought that Clive had fallen by his father's hand, and through his fault, too, was one from which the boy's sensitive nature would never disembarass itself. He would ponder and meditate over it, and allow it to oppress and influence him even to the last hour of his life. When he reached the gate, he stopped; but Mrs. Baird did not move.

'Aunt,' he said at last, after he had looked at her for a few seconds, 'do you not know me?'

Mrs. Baird seemed fairly bewildered.

'Ralph!—why, mysteries crowd upon mysteries! Where have you come from? what do you do here?'

She had not seen Ralph for some years, but there could be no mistake about those finely-chiselled handsome features. He had not fallen off in beauty since his childhood. He, too, could not fail to recognise her; no one who had ever seen Mrs. Baird's peculiar type of countenance could ever forget it.

But how it happened that he should suddenly have reappeared on the scene, and should be here in the midst of the tragedy which had been enacted on his behalf, fairly puzzled his straightforward aunt, who, for the first time, found herself playing rather an important part in one of those painful romances which will every now and then bubble up and disturb for a while the current of even the most steady and uneventful of lives.

Then, standing by the back-gate of the Folie Blanche, a long explanation ensued. The boy was bowed down and crushed by his deep sorrow over what had happened. But Mrs. Baird, hard and inflexible as she was by nature, had been sufficiently wrought on by recent events to treat him tenderly and mildly. A few months back, how different would have been the cold, stern words with which she would have addressed him! The sight of poor old Sternheim's infirmity had somewhat helped to feminise her, and had given her a

kindlier feeling towards human weaknesses. It has been well said that nothing makes a man or woman say so many foolish things as the desire to exhibit their own learning. And now that Mrs. Baird, in the face of all this trouble, had, for a time at least, forgotten herself, she had materially improved, and her shrewd good sense was very useful in the present miserable entanglements. Now that she did not drag Lord Bacon and the whole staff of philosophers into the conversation, whenever the slightest opportunity offered itself, she was the very woman on whom both Ralph and poor Georgie could lean for support and guidance. What seemed to astonish and chagrin her the most in all Ralph's tale was the fact that he was married, and to a French girl, too. The inveterate hatred she had taken to Mathilde extended itself to all her country people; and she did not feel at all disposed to look with a kindly feeling on this new niece, who claimed France as her birthplace, and who was in a great measure, though indirectly, the cause of all these troubles.

After their talk had gone on for some time, they were interrupted by hearing several voices discussing and arguing in a high tone. An immense amount of fuss and chatter seemed to have arisen in the court-yard in the front of the house. The *Commissaire de Police* of the district had arrived to make the usual inquiries into the cause of Clive's violent death, which had become the subject of extreme excitement for miles round.

'Georgie!—they will wake Georgie!' cried Mrs. Baird. 'Why, these French people are surely gifted with a double amount of tongue. I have not heard so much jabber in my whole life put together as I have been condemned to endure during the few hours I have been in France.'

'Bring Mrs. Clive down to our cottage,' suggested Ralph. 'It is very tiny, but she will at least be at peace, and away from all the annoyances which must take place here.'

'That is not a bad idea; but I hope your Rose is not a chatterbox.'

He smiled and shook his head.

'She will help to console Mrs. Clive, if any woman can.'

'Ah! the hey-day of love is not yet over,' said Mrs. Baird, with a grunt. 'Well, look you, a telegram must be sent to Paris, to a certain Captain Earlsfort, who will come

down at once. I cannot desert my post here till some one comes to take charge. Captain Earlsfort will soon have that Madame d'Aubigné and her train out of the house, or I do not know my man.'

'Give me the address, and I will get the telegram sent,' answered Ralph. 'In the meantime, let Mrs. Clive come to us. Rose and *mère* Nannette will do all they can to make her comfortable.'

Mrs. Baird was right—Captain Earlsfort's very name had a magic power. No sooner did old Jerome, who always managed to sift everything, tell Madame d'Aubigné that Dick had been sent for, than she immediately prepared to take her departure. He was the last person she wished to see just now; she had neither the assurance nor the spirits to meet his questioning as to why she was there.

Late on into the day did Georgie sleep. She was thoroughly worn out by her hasty journey and her long night of feverish watchfulness. When she did awake, Mrs. Baird was seated by her side, and for the first time in her life did Georgie throw her arms round her neck, and leave a kiss on the hard, bony cheek.

'How good you are to poor little me!' she said. 'But oh! Mrs. Baird, you cannot bring me back Oswald—my poor, poor, Oswald!' and she began to cry. 'I shall never forgive myself for letting him die with no one near him but that wretched woman.'

Mrs. Baird tried to soothe her to the best of her power, but Georgie whimpered on—

'And not one word for me! I was forgotten, quite forgotten—she was everything to him. Oh! Oswald, how could you die and leave no word for Georgie?'

Madame Philippean had entered the room with a tempting little dish, which she had been preparing for the poor young widow, and had heard these words, for her knowledge of English was no slight one. She leant over the bed, and whispered softly,

'He asked for you, *chère enfant*, very, very often, and his last word was "Georgie."'

A gleam of joy came over the sad face.

'Thank God there is a comfort left!' And Georgie's tears flowed anew over the thought that she had not been forgotten.

Then Madame Philippean went away; faithful though she was to Mathilde, she could not witness Georgie's child-like grief untouched.

Mrs. Baird caressed her, fondled her, with a tenderness of which no one would have believed her to have been capable. By way of interesting her, she told her of her interview with Ralph, and how he wanted her to go and stay in their cottage for a few days, till she should return to England.

'Ralph found, and Oswald dead! Oh! Mrs. Baird, this is all so strange and horrible—it is like some bad dream! I believe I have lost my poor little head. Do you think I shall ever be joyous and happy again? I know I am fast going mad. All night long I have fancied those sombre-looking hangings were a funeral procession, and that Madame d'Aubigné was heading it, with that terrible wand with which Mercury conducted the souls of the dead to the infernal regions. Tell me, Mrs. Baird, why should I think of such horrors in the midst of my sorrow?'

'The room is very dismal and drear, and you have been a good deal tried of late. Poor child! I think you would perhaps be happier at the cottage.'

'You say Ralph saw my poor dear Oswald before he died—he will tell me all about him; all the sad details which I could not bear to hear from that horrid woman's lips. Yes, let us go at once;' and she sprang up with some of her old impetuosity.

Here was an ordeal for Ralph! Georgie was never to be told by whose hand her husband had fallen; the cause of the accident which had occasioned his death was, if possible, ever to remain a mystery to her. This was Sir Henry Wilbraham's express desire, which he had impressed most strongly on Mrs. Baird. But Georgie's close cross-examination it would be no easy task to answer. Yes, under the searching glance of her true, clear eyes, was Ralph, in some measure, to expiate the share he had had in this sad history.

On the morrow Dick Earlsfort came, and made all the necessary arrangements, which, owing to the nature of Clive's death, added to the fact of his being an Englishman, were rather complicated, and required some one possessing Earlsfort's tact and knowledge of the ins and outs of the French laws to carry them through with adroitness. But at last the

funeral was over ; and few, perhaps, regretted that Georgie was a widow, save when they remembered the melancholy circumstances which had attended her husband's death. She had been very calm and quiet during her residence in the moss-covered cabin. The atmosphere of love in which she dwelt had, in a great measure, helped to subdue her grief. The novelty, too, of her present life was not without its effect, for be it remembered that Georgie's was a nature which was grateful for every change.

It was one of those glorious sunshiny days for which *la belle France* is so renowned—

‘ So calm that scarce the feathery weed,
Sown by some eagle on the topmost stone,
Swayed in the air.’

The trees were already full of rich verdure, the insect world was all alive. Everything around betokened happiness and peace ; only to the human heart, marred by sin and disobedience, did sorrow come. And yet who could gaze on this fair beauteous scene without a strong feeling of hope and faith ? Hope in the promises that the body should one day rise again in new robes of purification ; faith in the assurance that to each minim who tenants this lower earth shall that glorious resurrection come.

On the little rustic bridge, where they have wandered oft before, sat Rose and Georgie—but not the Georgie of the past. The effervescing sparkle which had ever been her great charm, had, for a time at least, deserted her. She was pale, and still, and subdued. It was not so much her husband's death which oppressed her, as the recollection of her own wilfulness. If she could only have received Clive's parting kiss, and the assurance that he had forgiven her, she would not be so sorrowful now, she thought. She had taken, in her usual warm, impulsive way, to Rose, and could not bear her out of her sight. It made her somewhat forget her grief, she said, to look on Rose's bright, fresh face ; and the two girls, for they were little more, formed a very pretty picture as they sat and chatted together on the little bridge ; Georgie forgetting for a time her sorrow, while, in her fluent, ungrammatical French, she gave Rose an account of what life was like in the great world ; then bursting into tears as

she suddenly recollected the misery which had befallen her, and made her life all blank and cold.

'Ah me!' said Rose, 'I almost wish Raphael were a real boatman. I shall not be half so happy when I am rich, and expected to play the part of a fine lady. I shall always be committing some *gaucherie*.'

'Never fear,' said Georgie, kissing her; 'you are too pretty and sweet-looking to get into much trouble. You need only be natural, my dear Rose, and all the rest will come by instinct.'

Rose shook her head.

'But I have no education, no accomplishments. Ah! it would have been better if Raphael had left me to pine in solitude and die in my own *vallée*, for he will grow ashamed of me when he gets back to his place in the world; and it will be so much harder to be deserted and die all alone—without a friend—in some large city.'

'You foolish, little silly child! As if Ralph would ever do such a thing! How can you talk so when such a bright vista is opening before you? You are making troubles, *Rosa mia*, and that they will come soon enough, without your seeking them, there is little doubt. You have yet to be initiated into the bright pleasures of life, while I—oh! Rose—can I ever be happy again?'

'I hope so, dear madame, and that you will help me through my difficulties.'

'Pray do not call me by that formal title,' said Georgie, smiling through her tears; 'call me Georgie, if we are to be friends. I am so glad you are going to England with me, dear Rose! If I had not found you in my sorrow, I do not know what I should have done. Mrs. Baird is very good and kind, but you are young and pretty, and I can love you so much better.'

Thus did the two young hearts gush forth in their fulness—Georgie trying to cast off the shadow of her past troubles—Rose forecasting those she thought she saw on the horizon. And so, a few days later, they all started for England together, and poor old Nannette was left alone for the first time. But she did not complain; she was full of joy over her child's good fortune. She herself, she felt, was tottering on the edge of the grave; and it would be a great

consolation to her, in the last hours of her life, to know that Rose was happy, and the wife of that good, kind Raphael.

Over Ralph, perhaps, of all the little party, hung the deepest gloom. Georgie's troubles would wear out with time ; purified, sobered by her griefs, she would at some future day nestle down in the quietude of Brinck Hall as Sir Henry Wilbraham's loved and loving wife ; but over Ralph would ever hang the sad recollection of the Berri tragedy.

The scene in his aunt's dingy parlour, when he should kneel at poor old Sternheim's feet, and weeping over the hopeless state of his childhood's friend, seek to awaken some gleam of recollection, would have its weight. Then would follow the interview with his father, the father who had stained his hands with blood for him. Only to seeing once more his mother did Ralph look forward, and to hearing her gentle voice welcome his beloved Rose as a daughter. And those who, in the years far onward, would quote Ralph Baird as an example of conscientious uprightness, would scarcely wonder over the calm sad look which ever dwelt on his handsome features, could they know the history of his early life.





CHAPTER XL.

IN THE TOILS.

IN a small café in one of the streets leading off the Boulevards, are sitting Sir Henry Wilbraham and Captain Earlsfort. It is rather an out-of-the-way little café, but one for which Dick has a great predilection. The landlord, to use his expression, 'has ideas;' and, above all, the place is not overrun with English and Americans; so he has just ordered a little supper worthy of his reputation of *bon viveur*.

'Now, my dear Hal,' he said, in his cheery way, 'I have ordered a repast at which Lucullus himself would not have grumbled—and a bottle of Château Laffitte. It is useless to engender melancholy. That long journey back from Berri has made me feel far more hungry than is good for digestion, so *à table*, my good friend; and when we have refreshed ourselves with well-cooked viands—for which thank the gods—we will discuss the events of the last few days.'

And so the supper began; but Sir Henry did by no means the same justice to it as did his companion. He was pre-occupied; his mind was filled with Georgie's image. He could not readily throw off the sort of gloom which the thought of her sorrow had produced.

'*Diantre*, man!' said Earlsfort, at last; 'why, the greatest luck in life befalls you, and yet you look for all the world as though you were condemned to be hanged.'

'What do you mean?' asked Sir Henry. 'What luck?'

'Why, isn't sweet Georgie a widow? Now, come, don't look so grave and stern. You don't mean to say that those dulcet words have not been ringing in your ears perpetually during the last few days?'

'I have been too perplexed and mystified by the whole

business to think coherently of anything,' answered Sir Henry, evasively; 'but now that you have returned, perhaps you will throw a little light on the subject. How on earth did Baird get on Clive's track, after all?'

'Well, you know, he was in Paris—came to Paris with me, on purpose to watch Madame d'Aubigné, who will get her quietus next—but that is in a parenthesis—she is very sharp and knowing, I make no doubt, but we outwitted her. Her maid was in our pay, not hers. I am not fond of soiling my fingers by too much dirty work, so I employed a certain M. Maxime to keep his eyes open on my behalf. He it was who gained the soubrette; and one evening, very late, she appeared at an address he had given her, with the information that Madame d'Aubigné had received a telegram from old Jerome, and that she was going off into Le Berri on the following morning. What the message was no one knew; but that where Jerome was there Clive was also to be found, we all felt very sure; and I suggested that Baird should assume a disguise, go by the same train as Madame d'Aubigné, follow her to her destination, and have it out with his man. The truth is, I was getting very tired of having Baird for a hanger-on—he was very pertinacious and troublesome; and as my little war was with the lady, I did not take much interest in his perpetual swearings against Clive. But if I had known what a determined brute he was, and that he meant to send that wretched Clive into eternity, when he did meet him, he would not have had much assistance from me.'

'He must be a very impetuous, wrong-headed sort of man,' observed Sir Henry.

'Of course he is. If he had gone carefully and judiciously to work, he might have given Clive a wholesome bit of chastisement, found his son, and saved the bloodstains—but then, my dear Hal, Georgie would not be free. There is an old proverb, you know, which says, "It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good."'

'Did you see Georgie when you were in Le Berri?'

'Ay, did I, and very pretty she looked, though the sooner you follow her to England, and bring back the colour to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes by your presence, the better. That *vaurien*, Clive, is not worth weeping over.'

'There is plenty of time. I cannot intrude my society on her vet.'

‘Pooh! my dear fellow, as if she would stand on etiquette with you! Why, I thought she seemed rather hurt that you had not offered to accompany the little party to England.’

‘Georgie never understood the conventionalities which decorum demands, and I suppose she never will, but they must be respected for all that,’ answered Sir Henry. ‘In the course of time, I acknowledge that I do hope she will give me the right to protect and shield her. Poor child! she has had a stormy life of late.’

‘Then don’t let her slip through your fingers, from over-cautiousness, this time,’ laughed Earlsfort. ‘Recollect husbands, as a rule, don’t die just when you want them, and Yankees with pistol-cases under their arms don’t arrive from America every day. However, I am a nice fellow to preach; I don’t seem to have been very successful in my own wooing.’

‘It was not my fault,’ said Sir Henry. ‘I urged everything I could in your favour.’

‘But the old painter with the Vandyck head was preferred before me—well, there is no accounting for taste. I tell you what it is, though, Hal—I don’t think I shall try again. I’ll stick to a *dûettante* life, and keep up gastronomy as a study.’

‘What a useless way of passing existence! You were meant for better things, my good friend, Dick.’

‘*Que voulez-vous, mon cher*, I have no ties. When you are settled down at Brinck Hall, with fair Georgie for its mistress, I’ll come and play uncle to the babies, and be sermonized and converted.’

‘You are a regular rattle-brain, my dear Dick. I wish I could take things as easily as you do.’

‘Well, you see, oaths are nearly worn out, and tears must be left to the women, so what is a fellow to do? I cannot afford a journey to Utah every time a fair girl chooses to give me a snub; besides, I have a very pretty piece of business carved out in this capital just now, the thought of which is keeping my spirits up wonderfully.’

‘What new bit of devilry are you going to enact? Who is the victim?’

‘Madame d’Aubigné, of course. You don’t think I am going to let her off scot-free? No, no; I intend to pay the Rue de la Chaussée d’Antin a visit to-morrow, and if I do

not have my lady on her knees to me, Dick Earlsfort—well, I'll never undertake to pay off an old score again.'

Sir Henry laughed ; he could not help acknowledging that Madame d'Aubigné had brought down on her own head 'the vials of Dick's wrath.' And the two men, having lighted their cigars, strolled out on to the Boulevards together. It was not yet very late ; the theatres were but just closed, all the cafés were lighted up, and were filled with *habitués*, enjoying to the utmost the pleasures of life. The whole air of the place, redolent as it was with the fumes of tobacco, seemed to breathe of conviviality, while the Babel of many voices which went on around was very characteristic of the great French capital.

The two friends had not proceeded far when Earlsfort was slapped somewhat familiarly on the back by a man who almost rolled up against him. It was Cis Trelawny.

'*Holà !*' Earlsfort. What ! are you back in Paris ? I thought you were burying Clive down in some country ditch. Upon my word, that man is a greater bore now he is dead than he was when he was alive !' drawled out Trelawny, in his rich, effeminate voice. 'Our fair friend in the *Chaussée d'Antin* refuses to be comforted, and declines to hold a *réunion* till another week at least has passed.'

'The devil she does !' muttered Earlsfort between his teeth.

'Something must be done ; that young cherubim, Léon de Monceau, must be brought into the field,' continued Trelawny.

He had evidently been consoling himself with *Veuve Clicquot*, or he would not have been so communicative to Earlsfort. Trelawny carried his womanishness even into his taste for wine. Champagne was his preference. Like Clarence's Malmsey, it would probably occasion his death, though perchance in a different way.

Earlsfort's brow contracted when he heard Léon de Monceau's name.

'Can't you contrive to carry on your little games without the help of boys ?' he said, angrily.

The tone of his voice jarred on Trelawny's ear.

'*Hein !* is there a traitor in the camp, by chance ?'

'My good fellow, you are crazed,' said Earlsfort, laughing, as he recollected his part. 'I will go and see Madame d'Aubigné myself to-morrow, and arrange something.'

And they passed on and left him.

'That is a kind of animal for which I have a sovereign contempt,' said Dick, sneeringly—'a sort of fellow who, with his handsome face, and dawdling, effeminate ways, does more mischief with the women-folk in a week than most other men do in ten years.'

'Well, I hope he will stop in Paris,' answered Sir Henry, 'That set of people have done quite enough mischief already.'

'Ah ! well, I don't think the Bijou will trouble any of us very long. "Pleasure will dig her own voluptuous tomb," as far as he is concerned. No man can live at the rate he lives and make old bones. I wish to Heaven, though, they would leave the boys alone. Women have a sort of instinct which helps them out of many a mess, but when these wretched young fledglings get into the hands of this gambling set ; woe betide both their souls and their bodies !'

'Have they got a new victim ? I should have thought the Ralph Baird business would have cured *her*, at all events.'

'Not a bit of it ; but I'll cure her, though, of some of her nonsense to-morrow !' and there was a tone of triumph in Earlsfort's voice, while he laughed quietly to himself. By-the-way, Wilbraham, I should not wonder if I were to accompany you to England in a day or two. The weather is getting rather warm for Paris. Only recollect I am to be left in peace at my club—not trotted out to witness all those gay wedding preparations.'

'Oh, the marriage will have to be put off for a time. It was to have taken place from Lady Ida Trant's house ; my mother will not have it at Brinck Hall.'

'Well, I don't want to hear anything about it. Without details, I shall get over my disappointment with honour to myself, I hope ; but if I am to have the subject perpetually paraded before me, I shall bolt off to Siberia, or Timbuctoo, or some such place, to get out of the way. Now good-night. To-morrow I have that to do which will require all my energy and all my intellect.'

So on the steps of one of the large hotels they parted ; and Sir Henry, as he continued his way alone, regretted more than ever that Glory's choice had not fallen on Dick, for, bravely though he fought against the appearance of it, he saw how bitter was his disappointment.

Captain Earlsfort was astir betimes in the morning—that is to say, it was early for him, for he had already finished his breakfast, and glanced hurriedly over his paper, when the clock struck twelve. Then he put on his hat and walked quickly along the Boulevards, nodding familiarly to many a man who passed him, but stopping to speak to none ; he had evidently some business on hand. At last he turned off from the more crowded thoroughfare, and ere long found himself in a part of Paris but little frequented by the fashionable world, and in which his appearance created some few observations, for there was a thorough look of *chic* about Earlsfort, notwithstanding the plainness of his features. He entered a quiet-looking *cabaret*, which stood at the corner of a dirty street. At this hour of the day it was almost deserted, save by one or two pale-faced, over-worked looking individuals who were breakfasting—that is to say, if half a *litre* of *vin ordinaire*, an unpleasant potion of *soup-a-l'oignon*, and a piece of very sour bread, can be called a breakfast. Earlsfort walked straight through the outer *salle* into a room beyond. There a little man sat waiting for him. It was M. Maxime, who, in a quiet, humble way, had played no unimportant part in influencing the destinies of more than one of the individuals who have appeared in this little history. Earlsfort shook him warmly by the hand, in the courteous affable way in which he ever bore himself to his inferiors. Then a long, earnest conversation ensued, and a small packet found its way from M. Maxime's pocket into Earlsfort's. Altogether, they seemed to have a great deal to arrange, and it was nearly two o'clock before they stood at the outer door of the *cabaret*, exchanging a few parting words.

'Now for the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin,' muttered Dick to himself, as he walked quickly back ; and ere long found himself once more on the Boulevards.

He had turned the corner of the street which led to Mathilde's abode, when he met the French boy looking very agitated and excited.

'*Holà*, young Léon, it does not require a conjuror to tell one from whence you come. She is at home, then—this Madame d'Aubigné ?'

'To me, yes. I have been breakfasting with her.'

'Feeding on sighs and drinking tears. You will excuse

me for laughing, my dear boy, but I am well versed in the "art of love," you know.'

'Poor woman! she is so very miserable. I pity her,' said the boy, feelingly.

'She need not make you so,' answered Earlsfort, with a shrug. 'I know on good authority that Madame d'Aubigné is likely to pay another visit to the country, and in all probability for a much longer time than the last. In that case will you come with me to England—I have a fancy to introduce you to a little London society.'

'Madame d'Aubigné going away!—she never told me so.'

'Probably she did not like to inform you of too many melancholy things at once; but that she will acquaint you soon of her intended journey, I am pretty sure.'

'I am beginning to feel I cannot live without her,' said the boy.

'Oh! yes, you can; and it is to make the trial less severe to you that I ask you to come to England with me.'

'M. Earlsfort, *vous êtes bien bon pour moi, mais*——'

'Nonsense, Léon, don't get up a scene in the street, for goodness' sake! Meet me at the Café Anglais at six o'clock, and we will talk the matter over as freely and as fully as you like.'

And Earlsfort, having reached the house in which Madame d'Aubigné lived, went up to the first-floor and rang the bell. It was answered by old Jerome.

'Madame d'Aubigné—is she at home?'

'Madame is very ill, and can see no visitors, monsieur.'

'You will go and tell her that I am here, and that I desire to see her immediately, on very pressing business,' said Dick, somewhat authoritatively.

Jerome looked at him for a moment; then without another word he left him, while he took this peremptory message in to Mathilde. In a few seconds he returned.

'Madame will see you, monsieur,' he said shortly, and Dick was ushered into the large bare-looking room.

Mathilde was standing by the table. She smiled graciously on Dick as she held out her hand to him; but for its icy coldness, he would not perhaps have guessed the amount of inward trepidation under which she was suffering, for she looked very calm and tranquil, while some artistically applied rouge concealed the deadly pallor of her cheeks.

‘I regret to have been compelled almost to force an entrance,’ said Earlsfort in his cheery voice, ‘but I intend to leave Paris in a day or two, and you and I, madame, have a little account to settle ere we part.’

It wanted but these words to put an end to all Mathilde’s assumed appearance of tranquillity and indifference. She sank heavily down on the sofa ; for some time past she had been anticipating a passage at arms with Captain Earlsfort ; now that it had come, she felt powerless to face it. Those few days in Le Berri had shaken Mathilde both physically and mentally.

‘You look very white and conscious-stricken,’ he observed ; ‘have you perhaps guessed the object of this visit ?’

‘Who, I, monsieur ? I think my servant told you I am very ill,’ and she tried to rouse herself.

‘There are maladies and maladies, my dear madame ; some are of the body, some are of the mind.’

She winced, but did not speak, so he continued—

‘You have now been for some weeks in Paris ; long enough, with your natural cleverness and quick-sightedness, to have become initiated in many of the mysterious workings of life which are going on around you. Pray may I ask you if you have ever heard of a class of beings who are tolerably well known as—swindlers ?’

Mathilde sprang up from her seat with a sort of gasp, but she fell back again without speaking.

‘Ah ! I see the name is not unknown to you ; then probably you are also aware how the law usually treats people belonging to this class.’

‘Oh, Monsieur, this is unkind, ungenerous,’ and the tear drops glistened in Mathilde’s eyes.

‘So then the shaft has taken aim ; but I have not done, the proof that you have outstripped most of the gambling community has yet to come,’ and Earlsfort took from his pocket the little parcel M. Maxime had given him but a few hours back.

He opened it, and laid two packs of cards on the table.

‘Madame d’Aubigné probably knows where the marks are to be found without my being at the trouble to show her,’ he said coldly.

Mathilde clasped her hands, and bowing down her head in shame, sobbed convulsively.

'I did not expect this from you!' she said. 'Why, Captain Earlsfort, do you persecute me thus?'

'Have you forgotten an office in Vigo Street, and a money-lender of the name of Dickson?' he asked, with a smile.

'Oh! Heaven, and this then is your revenge? Speak quickly—tell me the worst at once!'

He took her by the hand and led her to the window.

'Do you see a little man in a light coat walking on the other side of the street?'

She nodded her head.

'Look at him well—did you ever see him before?'

'Yes,' said Mathilde; 'you brought him here one evening. What of him?'

She had recognised in M. Maxime the little ugly man Earlsfort had brought to her *réunion* on the evening previous to the arrival of Jerome's telegram.

'He awaits but a signal from me to bring the agents of the *Police Correctionnelle* down upon this house; and I doubt if Madame d'Aubigné would find a residence in St. Lazare either very comfortable or very amusing. Under the Empire gambling—especially with marked cards—is somewhat severely punished.'

'A prison for me!—oh! Captain Earlsfort, you cannot be so cruel!' and Mathilde lost all her self-control, and laying her head on the sofa cushion wept passionately.

Dick did not even try to suppress the look of triumph which shone in his eyes, and he remained for some minutes a passive spectator of her grief. At last he said slowly—

'There is an alternative.'

Mathilde stopped her weeping and looked up at him inquiringly.

'Leave Paris at once, and go and seclude yourself for the rest of your wretched life in some out-of-the way country quarters, where no one will ever hear of you. If I were a priest, I would tell you to pray; but, being a simple layman, I have no faith in your conversion, only I think it is about time society was freed of your presence.'

'You would have me shut myself up in the country for the rest of my life, in solitude!' And Mathilde rubbed her eyes, as though she would awake herself from a bad dream. 'Ah! well, it will not last long, that is one comfort.'

‘Pardon, Madame, but remorse kills slowly. You will, nevertheless, find even a lifetime passed in strict privacy preferable to the contagion of a prison, though it be but for a term. You are, however, at liberty to choose between them.’

Mathilde shuddered, but she answered, quickly—

‘Yes, yes, I agree; but I suppose I may take Jerome with me, and choose my own locality for my future home.’

‘I leave all the details of the arrangement to yourself,’ he answered, pocketing the cards. ‘And now write a line to young Léon; tell him that important business requires you to leave Paris for a time, and that it will probably be months before you return. I will take the note with me, if you please.’

Not daring to disobey, she wrote it with a trembling hand, Earlsfort whistling carelessly the while.

He put his hat on as she gave it to him.

‘I suppose you will make it convenient to leave Paris within twenty-four hours?’ he said. ‘And now Madame d’Aubigné, *nous sommes quittes*. You keep your part of the compact, and I will keep mine. Recollect I have the cards, and M. Maxime for a witness that they were found in your house.’

Thus they parted—to meet in this world no more. And before many days were over, Sir Henry Wilbraham and Earlsfort, accompanied by young Léon de Monceau, arrived in London; and most fervently did the two elder men hope that Earlsfort’s little plan had been successful, and that the sting had at last been taken out of the formidable d’Aubigné.





CHAPTER XLI.

AFTER THREE YEARS.

IT is Christmas Eve. Large log-fires are burning cheerily throughout that old-fashioned Hampshire Hall of which Georgie had been wont to speak so disparagingly, and which she used to insult with the undignified appellation of 'mouldy corner.' But now nearly three years have passed away since the widow-caps first covered her golden curls ; and, in the school of sorrow, smarting under the feeling of remorse which the recollection of her own wilfulness did not fail to produce, Georgie has learnt, in a great measure, to subdue that unruly member—her stinging tongue ; and to view the responsibilities and duties of life from a very different aspect.

Well has it been said that

The path of sorrow, and that path alone,
Leads to the land where sorrow is unknown,

and perhaps Georgie in her more sober moods—for she did sometimes now allow herself the time for thought—had arrived at acknowledging this as a truth. Certain it is that when, at the expiration of her year of widowhood, she became Lady Wilbraham, Sir Henry had every reason to rejoice that the taming process had been so successfully accomplished. The weeds which at one time had so abounded in Georgie's character, had nearly all been trodden down or crushed out ; and the sweet flowers of gentleness, generosity, and love were in future to blossom and thrive in their place. When the Baronet led her for the first time as its mistress across the portal of the quaint old doorway at Brinck Hall, how thankful did he feel that, during the exciting episode of these few months, he had had sufficient strength given him to enable

him to temper his passions, and take duty for his guide. Now, as he threw his arm round his fair young wife, and left a kiss on her smiling upturned face, he felt she was his, his very own. Calm in his strengthful reliance on a Higher Power, he had accepted his lot with patience, striven manfully against temptation ; and now, with no self-upbraidings to haunt his pillow, in this softened, gentler Georgie he had obtained his reward.

Still all fun and lightsomeness has not been crushed out with the weeds, and Georgie can yet be glad and merry as of yore. A large party is assembled in the house, to keep Christmas after good old country fashion ; and she is by no means the least joyous in that laughing, noisy circle. She is very happy and contented in her married life.

‘No one understands me so well as dear old Henry,’ she remarks to Dick Earlsfort, as he sits on a low sofa, talking to his fair hostess during that cosy half-hour before the dressing-bell rings ; ‘he always seems to know by instinct when I am likely to get bored, and has something to suggest by way of a digression from the humdrum monotony of everyday life, so that one is never worried into a state of fretfulness.’

‘Then you have not quite outgrown all symptoms of that disorder?’ said Earlsfort laughing.

‘No, indeed, I am afraid they are chronic ; but I cannot tell you what an affliction it is to have a ceaseless desire for change. I have tried—oh ! so hard—to get rid of it, but I am afraid it is a malady that can only be kept under, not cured. Much as I love Henry and my precious boy, your small namesake, I believe I should end by hating them both, if I were shut up for any considerable time alone with them in this dear dull old Hall.’

‘Oh, no, Lady Wilbraham, you would not ; you are doing yourself an injustice when you talk thus.’

Georgie coloured slightly.

‘Another of my old malpractices,’ she said, ‘that of letting my tongue outstep its limits. Ah ! well, you see I am beginning to know my faults, Captain Earlsfort, and that, they say, is half-way towards mending them ; but what on earth do you mean by starting Lenten talk at this festive season ? We are going to have a dance after dinner—that is far more to the purpose—and at twelve o’clock precisely the babies

are to be brought in, for the express purpose of being kissed under the misletoe. Poor little brats ! I wonder if it will bring them any luck?—only don't talk of it before Mrs. Baird, for the good old soul is sure to say they would be better in bed.'

And so, as the clock struck twelve, the infantine element was introduced. Mrs. Dillon's somewhat precocious two-year-old boy toddled in, hand in hand with the loveliest little fairy girl, Ralph and Rose Baird's tiny daughter. But lately arrived from America, on a visit to Brinck Hall, they looked on in fond delight as the baby procession entered, and even Ralph's pale, melancholy features lighted into joy as he stooped to kiss the laughing, dimpled faces. Then came 'the glory and the darling of the old baronial Hall,' too young, as yet, to take an active part in the night's festivities ; still, he was his mother's boy, and thus seemed to appreciate the lights and noise, for he crowed and laughed, and did his little best to make himself agreeable. At last the children were carried off to bed, and the dancing went on far into that Christmas morning.

During the early part of the evening Mrs. Baird and Lady Ida had been sitting apart, discussing a variety of dry topics interesting only to themselves ; but Georgie had at last succeeded in worrying them into a little conviviality, and before the festivities were over, they were both induced to stand up in Sir Roger de Coverley, and, as Georgie said, 'to dance away from under the weight of their ponderous, dusty, fusty books.'

And from this merry gathering old Lady Wilbraham was the only absentee. For some months now she had not left her room ; and though she was pleased to see the happy, bright faces of the younger generation when they came to chat with her and wile away a dull half-hour, yet she would never join in the tumult of the busy world again. Georgie was right in her prediction that Glory's marriage would be freely forgiven : honest, pleasant old Dillon was no unwelcome visitor in Lady Wilbraham's sick chamber. And between Ralph Baird and Mr. Dillon there is a strong link of friendship. Poor old Sternheim has gone to his rest ; with his head on Dillon's shoulder, his spirit passed away, and the troubled mind was at peace.

Now let us leave this joyous, merry party to keep high

Christmas revel under Sir Henry Wilbraham's hospitable roof ; and, before we bid our reader farewell, let us wander for a brief space to another scene.

It is that same Christmas-eve. A clear, sharp, frosty night ; all Paris is astir. From every church there issues a stream of light, and in joyful strains bursts forth the glad and glorious chaunt of the first Christmas mass, while the people flock in hundreds to join in the midnight service. Near the door of St. Philippe de Roule there kneels a pale woman clad in black. Her sombre garments are but little in unison with the gay dresses of the other worshippers, and the passers-by bestow a glance of pity as they think how dreary festive seasons are for those who weep over the loved and lost ; but she never looked up. With bent head and clasped hands she adored the Holy Mass ; then rising, with a hurried step she left the church—unattended. Yet she seemed delicately nurtured, and there were the remains of much past beauty in the pale, haggard face. She walked rapidly through the streets till she reached a house not far from the Barrière. It was small, wretched, and dirty. She groped her way up the dark staircase till she reached the fourth or fifth storey. Taking a key from her pocket, she opened a door and entered. At the farther corner of the room there crouched a human form. She leant for a second over the miserable bed, but he who lay there only moaned, and spoke not. She took up a candle which stood on a table close by, and looked at him. Who but herself could have recognised in that coarse, bloated face the once joyous, careless beauty—Cis Trelawny. Earlsfort had predicted rightly—drink and dissipation had done their work ; and for him who now writhed in pain on that pallet bed this was the last Christmas morning which would ever dawn on earth. And Madame d'Aubigné, too, was changed—for she it was who lingered about the dying man, and, with womanly tenderness, sought to mitigate the agonies of the 'Bijou's' last hours.

And to her, too, had no retribution come ? Yes, though to all appearance Mathilde d'Aubigné had bowed before Dick Earlsfort's mandate, yet it was really Clive's death which had broken her high spirit. With him had died all the strength of will which would, perchance, have made her defy Earlsfort even to the end, and fight the battle out with him, even to the walls of a prison. But Oswald was gone,

and with him her interest in the pleasures of the world. Old Jerome, too, had, during the last few months, been summoned from earth ; and now Mathilde stood beside her last friend. A few days since, she had heard casually of Trelawny's forlorn, miserable state, and disregarding Earlsfort's orders, she had come up at once from her country residence to seek him out. But he knew her not. His mind had given way ; and Mathilde shuddered as she watched the poor maniac, who every now and then, in a hoarse, guttural voice, so unlike the big, luscious notes of former days, desecrated the stillness of that drear chamber with some refrain of the past. She remembered how she had helped this wretched man to sin ; and she closed her large eyes, now sunk deep in her head, as though she would fain shut out the picture which eternity presented for them both.

And so it was. One by one they were all gone, and Mathilde was left alone to linger through a long lifetime with burning thoughts ever scorching in her brain, and the 'worm that dieth not'—remorse—at her heart. Let us hope that in the torturing agony of those weary years of inward torment, she has her punishment ; and for the unknown future that awaits her, let us simply breathe a merciful 'Requiescat in pace.'



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